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Measuring the societal value of the public library: terminology, dimensions and methodology

Frank Huysmans & Marjolein Oomes

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1. From inputs and outputs to outcomes

Outcome measurement in libraries is trending. That has not always been the case. A look at the evolution of ISO standards for library metrics, developed largely by the library community itself, shows a gradual evolution from inputs and outputs to outcomes. The first standard, ISO 2789 (first version 1974) dealt with collecting statistics on input and output indicators to enable international comparison and benchmarking. Inputs like budgets, personnel, square meters, collection and items purchased; and outputs like the number of registered users and visitors, loans, interlibrary loans and organized events.

ISO-standard 11620 (first version 1998) introduced library performance indicators: things like the percentage of the target population reached, costs per loan, speed of fulfilling interlibrary lending requests, percentage of required titles available in the collection, etcetera. Whereas the input and output indicators from the earlier standard are mere counts - *absolute* figures -, these performance indicators are *relative* figures, often relating the earlier counts to one another. On the basis of these easy-to-count quantities, they give an impression of the quality of the services the library provides to its users.

Two aspects of the performance measurement indicators led to growing unease in the library community. First, the indicators were mainly geared at the performance of national, academic and research libraries. They were of limited usefulness for public and school libraries, whose specific performance criteria were not met. Public libraries in particular host and offer a range of services seldom seen in other types of libraries, e.g. language cafés for second language learners, reading aloud to children, digital skills courses, reading groups, etc.

Second, the indicators were useful for benchmarking purposes from a managerial point of view. Based on inputs and outputs, they were but faint proxies of the impact the services had on the end users, e.g., their professional skills, study results, creative development, and cultural knowledge (cf. Renard 2007).

Meanwhile, pressure mounted from the outside - especially those providing the budgets, like university boards and municipal councils - on library managers to demonstrate the value of the library for its users and communities.

In recent years, a third standard was developed, ISO 16439 (first version 2014), which attempted to lay the groundwork for library impact assessment (cf. Poll 2012).

Besides library inputs and outputs, now also outcomes would enter the picture (cf. Matarasso 1998; Kyrillidou 2002). Figure 1 is an attempt to clarify the distinction between outputs and outcomes for public libraries in particular.

Figure 1: Comparing public library outputs and outcomes (Huysmans & Oomes 2013: 170).

Library story:	Output:		Outcome:
Expressed in mission statements (things we say and aim to do)	Products / services / activities	# people who are helped / reached	Perceptible effect / change (in behaviour, knowledge, skills, attitude, life situation, status)
(Things we say)	(Things we do and that we (should) count)		(Things we want to know)
Stimulate reading and contribute to the level of language skills	Collection (quantity / quality); host literacy courses, reading circles; supply schools with books and learning materials	Use of materials, # of participants	Did people truly read the books they borrowed? Were they inspired/ surprised? Did their reading skills improve? Was their horizon broadened? Are they inclined to read more often?
Stimulate local involvement and citizenship	Organization of meetings / lectures / debates; supply of government information	# of participants, visitors, brochures that were taken, web statistics	Did people learn new things? Did they meet new people? Did information help them to form / change their opinion? Were they activated to be more involved in the democratic process?

An extensive literature review (Oomes, forthcoming) yielded six kinds of such public library outcomes:

- increase in knowledge and/or understanding
- increase in skills (e.g., job application; digital skills)
- change in attitudes and norms & values (e.g. vis-à-vis others with a different cultural background - asylum seekers)
- change in activities and behavior
- change in social status and life circumstances (e.g. finding a job - better financial position)

- change in emotional/mental state/experience (enjoyment, inspiration, creativity, self-confidence)

It goes without saying that assessing or measuring such outcomes goes way beyond what can easily be counted within the library walls. Before advancing to methodological issues, however, we first turn to conceptual issues.

2. Impact, value, outcome: some terminological clarification

In speaking of what libraries bring about, a plethora of terms is used. Authors in the field speak of *effects*, *impact* (or *personal/social impact*), *benefits* (or *perceived benefits*), *performance*, *value*, *outcomes*, *return on investment* (ROI), and *social return on investment* (SROI) of the library. The ISO 16439 standard attempts to bring some order in this discussion by defining what is to be understood under each of these terms. An analysis of these definitions by us reveals six underlying dimensions. An *effect* of the library's products/services can be:

- positive or negative
- intended or unintended
- direct or long-term
- pre-defined or not pre-defined
- tangible or intangible
- actual or potential

Impact is to be understood as the most general term. It is defined in ISO 16439 (2014, p. 4) as a "difference or change in an individual or group resulting from the contact with library services". To which we would add: regardless whether it is a positive or negative difference or change, intended or unintended, and so forth for the other dimensions.

A *value* of library services, following the ISO definitions and trying to classify these, can be seen as a *positive* change, with no fixed positions on the other five dimensions. A *benefit* would be still a bit more specific, meaning an effect that is positive, intended and actual. Whether it is short-term or long-term, predefined or not and tangible or intangible is not important.

An *outcome*, on the other hand, is meant to be a "direct, pre-defined effect of the output related to goals and objectives of the library's planning", including outcomes "that concern the library's institution or community" (p. 7). The latter part of that definition can be interpreted as saying that the effect should be positive, intended and actual, on top of its being direct and pre-defined. In other words, outcomes are to be seen as a very narrow category of library effects. They are tightly connected with specific library programs (e.g. tackling low literacy or second language acquisition) and not with the more general service provisions like lending out books and offering a reading room for the consultation of newspapers, magazines and books.

3. Dimensions of public library value

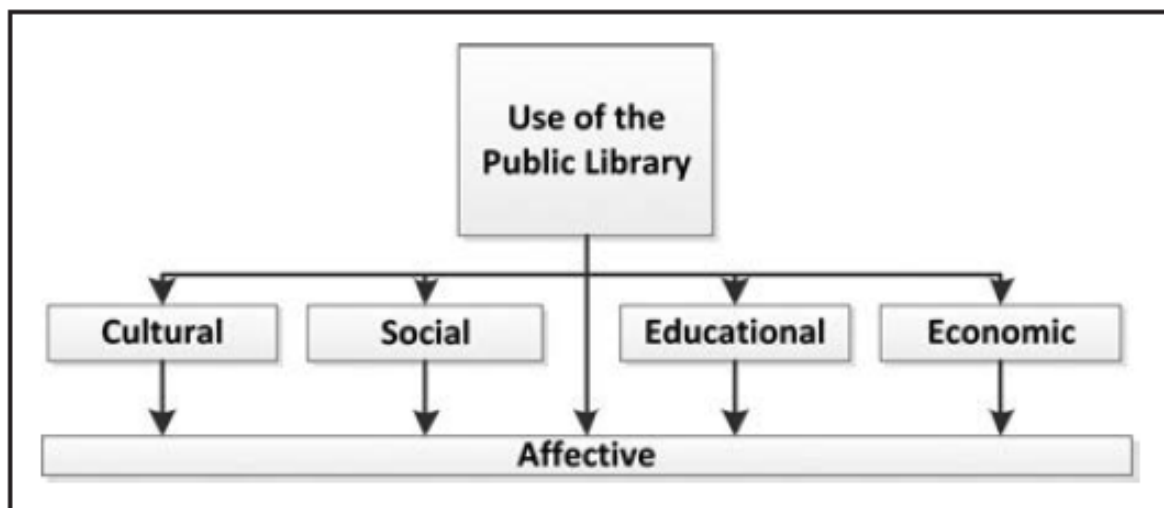
In our research program on public libraries in the Netherlands, we aim at assessing the *value* of the general services for individuals, communities and society at large, as well as more specific *outcomes* of special programs. In the literature, containing both theoretical/ normative and empirical studies, various personal and societal domains or areas are distinguished in which the library claims, or at least expects or aims, to exert an influence and in which it attempts to bring about positive changes. Based on an extensive literature review (Huysmans & Oomes 2013; Oomes, forthcoming; cf. Matarasso 1998), five main categories are distinguished.

- *Social*: in this domain we include the gains connected with the field of social relations and the connectedness and mutual involvement between individuals, and between individuals and society. Terms that can be derived from the literature are 'community involvement', 'participation', 'community identity', 'social cohesion', 'social inclusion' and 'social capital'.
- *Cultural*: the library performs an important cultural function connected with artistic activities (get acquainted with, and disseminating, information about the arts and culture) but also in the multicultural realm (get acquainted with, and exposed to, a variety of cultures and provenances).
- *Educational*: the gains in this domain touch upon typical library topics such as lifelong learning, literacy, media literacy, etc. Gains are often connected with acquiring new knowledge and skills, but the library can influence persons in their attitudes and behaviour towards schooling, education and personal development

as well. Furthermore, having access to and processing information are specific elements to be subsumed under the educational heading because of the tight link between knowledge and information.

- *Economical*: the gains in this domain are related to the financial wellbeing of individuals or the community's welfare. Libraries can play a role in reducing poverty by giving access to information infrastructures and sources without costs, but also help people develop the skills they need to function well in employment or in managing their personal finances, and can help lift a neighbourhood out of an economical backlog.
- *Affective*: this domain pertains to the individual mental and physical (emotional) state and individual experiences, e.g. relaxation, amusement, emotional arousal, or the feeling that one's horizon has just broadened by learning something new. The gains in this domain touch upon emotions and the intrinsic experiential value connected with using library services. Health, as a form of physical wellbeing, is subsumed under this heading as well. What is more, gains in the social, cultural, educational and economical dimensions typically lead to positive affective responses. Therefore, we tend to understand the affective dimension as a very broad one (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Dimensions of public library value, based on literature review (Huysmans & Oomes, 2013: 174; Oomes, forthcoming)



4. Measuring the societal value of public libraries

It goes without saying that attempting to capture all five dimensions of public library value, in all of the services it provides, is not an easy task. Developing a combination of measurements is a multi-year undertaking, and one on which we are still working. As a spin-off of this undertaking, comparative studies have been undertaken to see how well the Dutch public library system - in terms of *benefits* as perceived by public library users - is performing compared to the systems in other countries (see Vakkari et al. 2014, 2016).

Currently, at the national library of the Netherlands a 'library research system' is under development. Its aims are twofold:

1. to assess societal value of (public) library system on national level, based on local measurements;
2. to aid local libraries in improving their programs, thereby increasing their value for individual users and the local community, and together - in so doing - boosting their societal value.

In this system, public library special programs (e.g., geared at low literacy) are monitored in such a way that the local library can use the results to improve its activities, while on the national level a picture should emerge of what the whole system (ca. 155 public library organizations with ca. 900 branches) is achieving for society as a whole.

The basic idea is to combine top-down and bottom-up approaches:

- top-down: develop questionnaires (core questionnaire + optional modules);
- bottom-up : use these questionnaires in the local libraries and add qualitative methods (interviewing users/participants);
- aggregate/synthesize local findings to arrive at a national picture.

Another important issue is how data should be collected. The ISO 16439 standard (pp. 21ff) lists three forms of evidence:

- inferred (from input & output measures, e.g. registrations of collections and loans);
- solicited (asking users, e.g. about actual / potential outcomes);
- observed (systematically recording facts, actions and behaviours in situations of interest; tests).

At the moment, a prototype of a measurement procedure is under development in the Netherlands using combinations of these three forms. After completion, it will be piloted and tested in two library organizations, each with several branches (one in an urban, and one in a rural setting). Depending on the experiences, its strengths and weaknesses, it will be improved and re-tested, possibly in a wider range of libraries.

On the national level, data on the regular services of the libraries should become available from another source, also under development: a national data warehouse of library collections, loans, registered users, visitors etc. In combining data on both regular services and special programs, we hope to establish a sound empirical base for demonstrating the public library's social value for society. The reader is cordially invited to track the progress and help us complete the project, as we believe international co-operation and mutual learning is key to this undertaking.

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