

**Public libraries in Africa – agents for development and innovation? Current Perceptions of local stakeholders**

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**Abstract:**

*This paper presents a methodology and preliminary results of a study to research perceptions of stakeholders and the public towards public libraries in six African countries. The study is closely linked with EIFL (<http://www.eifl.net>) Public Library Innovation Program, which awards grants to public libraries globally to address a range of socio-economic issues facing their communities, including projects in Kenya, Ghana and Zambia.*

*The goal of the study is to understand the perceptions of national and local stakeholders (municipalities, ministries, public agencies, media, etc.) and the public (including non-users) in public libraries in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe about the potential of public libraries and understand how these stakeholders could best be positively influenced to create, fund, support or to use public libraries.*

*As far as it is known, surveys of this kind have not been done in African countries so the paper acquaints the audience with the field which has not been explored and provides background for increased library advocacy in Africa.*

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**Introduction**

American professor William Edwards Deming once has said: *It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.* It is obvious that libraries globally operate in more changing environment than ever before. One of the key characteristics of this environment is constant questioning of their need and relevance, which can be argued only with targeted systematic and evidence based advocacy. However, effective demonstration of library value to stakeholders is impossible without understanding the baseline of their attitudes and perceptions of libraries.

For these reasons many perception studies were launched in recent years, providing a strong basis of data for advocacy campaigns, mainly aiming to argue against library budget cuts and closures. However, most of these studies focus on libraries in highly developed countries like the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (UK), while the study of perceptions of stakeholders in developing or transitional countries was relatively neglected.

Enabling access to knowledge through libraries in developing and transition countries is a key focus of EIFL, an international not-for-profit organization which recently launched a Public Library Innovation Program (PLIP) and awarded a first round of projects to grantees from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. These local public library projects are aiming at helping to transform lives through innovative services. In relation to this activity EIFL has identified a big gap of research on perceptions of public libraries in developing or transitional countries and strong need for related advocacy actions and therefore initiated this survey of perceptions of multiple stakeholder audiences.

The goal of the study is to understand the perceptions of certain stakeholders (national and local officials like municipalities, ministries, public agencies, media, etc.) and the public (including non-users) in public libraries in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe about the potential of public libraries and understand how these stakeholders could best be positively influenced to create, fund, support or to use public libraries.

The study looks at the general state of and current awareness, perceptions and attitudes towards public libraries. As regards the public (users and non users) it also investigates library usage behavior and frequency of use, sources of information about libraries, satisfaction levels with the library and librarian, barriers to library use and willingness to use them in future. In case of national and local level officials, the study aims to identify their priorities for libraries and how they perceive the importance of libraries as potential players in local and national development.

The paper introduces a field which yet has not been explored and provides background for evidence based advocacy for public libraries in Africa. Also it aims to contribute to the methodology and effectiveness of practical research on public perceptions of public libraries.

## **1.1. Research into perceptions of libraries**

Investigating the perceptions of various stakeholder audiences has been always a focus of library research. However when heavy budget cuts were threatened affecting for example the book fund, staffing, outreach, or reader development work, such studies to provide the evidence on perceived library value became increasingly important.

One of the solid studies to be mentioned is the “Long Overdue: a fresh look at Public and Leadership attitudes about libraries in 21<sup>st</sup> century”, initiated by Public Agenda in 2006 in the USA. The study revealed that public believes in the importance of public libraries in future and a strong majority says that if their public library were to shut down, they would feel that something essential and important has been lost, affecting the whole community. The study pointed out that people believe their communities must have well-functioning public libraries in order to be healthy and strong. Moreover, 71 percent of respondents said that libraries spend public money well and half of them stated that they would agree with increased taxes in order to support their local library. In addition to the valuable data on library it has identified some areas of library work where public expectations were not fully met and uncovered the areas of opportunities (Public Agenda, 2006).

Another significant contribution to the body of knowledge was the study “From awareness to Funding”, issued by OCLC in 2008. The study investigated the willingness of supporting public libraries of residents of U.S. communities and elected officials and explored the reasons why people do or don't support libraries. The study found that most people claim they would support the library but fewer are firmly committed to it. It also highlighted great lack of awareness regarding library funding challenges. Data showed that library support is only marginally related to visiting the library and therefore advocacy campaigns have to be focused on other groups than the library users. The researches proved that perceptions of the librarian are highly related to support. An additional strong motivator directly related to the level of funding support is the belief that the library is a

transformational force in people's lives. The survey of elected officials indicated that they are supportive of the library—but not fully committed to increasing funding (OCLC, 2008).

Interesting data on library related perceptions of the largest minority group in the U.S. – Latinos was collected within the study “Latinos and Public Perceptions”, performed by The Thomas Rivera Policy Institute in 2008. The study helped to understand patterns of Latinos library use, perceptions of the library among Latinos and the factors that drive Latino library use. This study found that Latinos hold positive perceptions of libraries and also determined social and demographical factors influencing library use, revealed the high importance of staff service and offered policy recommendations to attract more Latinos into public libraries (Flores, Pachon, 2008).

In 2010 OCLC initiated another extensive study “Perceptions of Libraries”. The study report provides insights into information consumers and their online habits, preferences, and perceptions. Particular attention was paid to how the economic downturn has affected the perception of libraries. The study revealed that huge numbers of people were affected by the recession and 81% of those economically impacted are users of libraries. It was noted that respondents perceive increased value in the library, for both themselves and their communities. The value of the librarian grew even stronger and the study proved a high correlation between funding support for public libraries and positive librarian perceptions (OCLC, 2008).

One of the latest looks into public perceptions towards public libraries in UK was the study “What do the public want from libraries?”, initiated by MLA in 2010. The research showed that the English public widely value public libraries as a force for good and one that should be provided free. A significant proportion (74 per cent) of current users surveyed described libraries as “essential” or “very important” in their lives. Fifty-nine per cent of non users also think libraries play an “important” or “essential” role in the community. But it also suggests that the notion of library users and non-users is an artificial divide and that instead that people's reliance on libraries tends to vary as their life circumstances change, for example through taking up study, becoming unemployed, having children or retiring.

Book choice, good customer service, staff expertise and convenience are seen as key to user satisfaction. Both users and non-users often expressed concern about books being “squeezed out” for other services and although they accepted greater automation, they do not think this should be at the expense of maintaining a knowledgeable and helpful staff base (MLA, 2010).

## 1.2. Research context

EIFL is an international not-for-profit organization with a base in Europe and a global network of partners. The organization works with library consortia in developing and transition countries to enable sustainable access to high quality digital information for library users.

EIFL was founded in 1999, with a mission of enabling access to knowledge through libraries in developing and transition countries to contribute to sustainable economic and social development. It began by advocating for affordable access to commercial e-journals for academic and research libraries in Central and Eastern Europe. EIFL now partners with libraries and library consortia in close to 50 developing and transition countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. Today its work includes a range of programs and initiatives as part of two core initiatives:

- **Access to Knowledge for Education, Learning and Research** – ensuring well-resourced libraries, modern Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and skilled staff to provide essential support to students and scholars.
- **Access to Knowledge for Sustainable Community Development** – helping to transform lives through innovative services in public libraries.

In 2010 EIFL launched the Public Library Innovation Program, recognizing that the use of technology offers new opportunities to increase access to knowledge, helping to improve standards of living and to transform lives. For many people in developing and transition countries, the public library is the only place to access computers and the Internet, together with quality-assured information resources. Through technology, public libraries are also well positioned to extend access to previously under-

served communities. Yet in many countries where the need is greatest, public libraries are under-resourced.

The Public Library Innovation Program aims to spark innovative services in public libraries to improve lives. Under this program, EIFL encourages public libraries to reach out to their communities through pilot projects. In April 2010, EIFL funded 12 such projects in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

In connection with this activity, EIFL identified a gap in knowledge about the perceptions of public libraries by their stakeholders, which is important information in order to be able to advocate effectively for increased and sustainable funding of public libraries.

Initiating this study, EIFL aims to understand the perceptions of different stakeholders of public libraries in Africa, and in particular in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Uganda; about the potential of public libraries so as to understand how these stakeholders could best be positively influenced to create/fund/support or use public libraries. This study has the potential for further communication campaigns aimed at raising the public awareness of the potential contribution of the public libraries to sustain livelihoods. The changes in perceptions would then lead to increased awareness of innovative ways that libraries can serve public needs and funding for public libraries.

### **1.3. Research methodology**

The main objective of the study is to understand the perception of different stakeholders on the public libraries. Specific objectives of the study include:

- To understand the current awareness, perceptions, attitudes and actions towards public libraries of both funders and public;
- To understand the perception of library staff of their role in local development is and to identify the barriers they face;
- To identify trusted information channels of funders and public to enable effective awareness rising campaigns.

Research took place in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Uganda. Research partner for this study was “TNS Research International” which in the recent past successfully conducted numerous quantitative and qualitative surveys in Africa across a wide range of social research sectors. As a result of many years of research experience, they have developed highly accurate and efficient methods of conducting both qualitative and quantitative research.

The study covered five broad sample groupings:

- A survey of users of public libraries (a user was defined as anyone who has used the library, open to the public in last 12 months);
- A survey of non users of public libraries (a non user was defined as anyone who has NOT used a library in the past one year);
- A survey of public librarians and library officials (library directors/managers, deputy directors/managers, professional librarians, assistant librarians and support staff);
- A survey of local officials (the representatives of local authorities/municipalities, who fund or do not fund local libraries);
- Qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews (IDIs) carried out with the officials from the ministries, national agencies and national media.

The surveys were carried out nationwide in each country focusing on the public libraries, urban and rural structural units, including community run libraries. Sampling of respondents was conducted on the basis of the geographical distribution. The research applied random and target sampling. Random sampling was applied in surveys of the public libraries’ users and non-users, public librarians and library officials, representatives of local stakeholders’ institutions. Target sampling was used when performing survey of representatives of national stakeholders’ sub-groups such as ministries, national agencies and media.

For the library users the respondents were selected at the sampled libraries. Interviews were done using both entry and exit interviews.

For the library non users respondents were selected from within catchment area of approximately 20Km from the sampled library for the user survey. Households were selected using the random route technique and a screener question used at the house to select the respondent and verify eligibility as a non user.

For the target group of librarians a sample of libraries was drawn from the universe and assigned librarian samples. More than one librarian could be interviewed in one library depending on library size and location. All libraries selected for the users sample automatically included a librarian sample. In most of the countries, the librarian sample was distributed between public libraries and community libraries.

For the local officials the sample was distributed among local and municipal authorities funding and managing libraries and those who are not running libraries. The national level officials were identified with the help of EIFL coordinators in the respective countries.

Samples varied by target groups and are summarized in the table below:

1. Table. Total Research Plan

Method	Target group	Sampling	Sample size
<b>Quantitative research</b>			
<b>Face to face library exit interviews</b>	Library users	Random sampling	1990
<b>Face to face random interviews</b>	Library users	Random sampling	1201
<b>Face to face interviews</b>	Public librarians/library officials	Random sampling	283
<b>Face to face interviews</b>	Local Stakeholders	Random sampling (50/50 of officials who run/not run public library in the area)	278
<b>Qualitative research</b>			
<b>In-depth Interviews</b>	National stakeholders	Targeted sampling	99

All research instruments were developed by EIFL with the input of TNS Research International, based on their knowledge and experience. As these instruments were based on the international experiences that have never been tested in Africa so the instruments had to be adapted to local context and piloted prior to the survey. 10 pilot interviews per country were done to pre-test each of the quantitative questionnaires. The interviewers checked the clarity of the questions, ability of respondents to answer all questions both in terms of relevance and questionnaire design, the flow of the questionnaire, relevance of translation to local languages and all other issues helping to improving the questionnaire.

Thorough quality control mechanisms were used both during fieldwork and data processing stages. In the fieldwork stage it included training of interviewers as well as debriefing sessions with their teams during the process of data collection, performed by team leaders. The team leaders accompanied 5% of all interviews conducted, another 10% of all interviews conducted by each interviewer were back-checked by supervisors who got in touch with the respondent and re-asked a few relevant questions to ascertain that the interview was in fact done. 100% of questionnaires were checked going through completed questionnaires by the team leader before data processing.

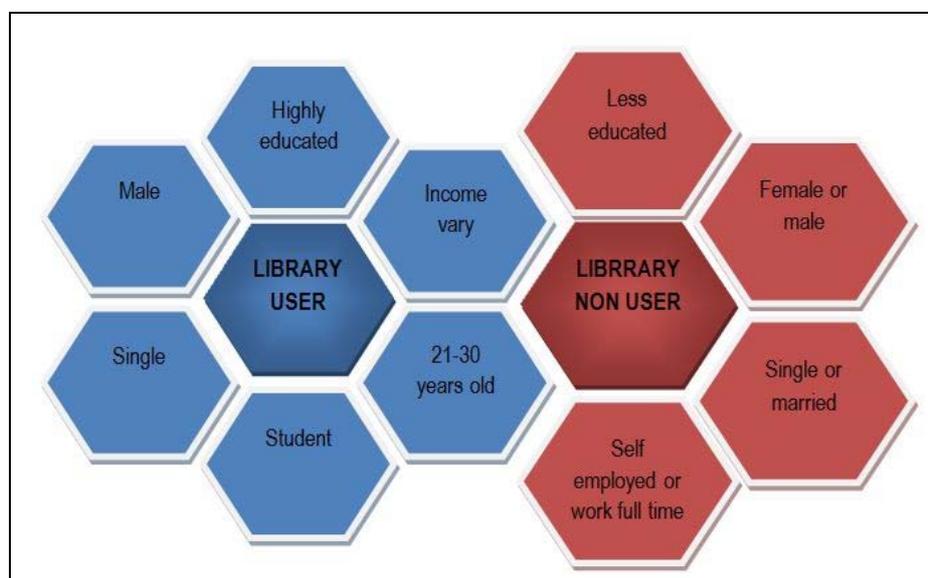
## 1.4. Research findings

### 1.4.1. Library users and non users

The research revealed that libraries in Africa are mainly used by young people (48 percent of users are aged between 21 and 30 years old and 39 percent aged between 16 and 20 years old). 70 percent of users are men. Data shows that library users have quite high level of formal education – 30 percent of them have some post secondary studies in universities or technical institutes, 30 percent have some secondary, 17 percent – completed secondary education. 80 percent of library users are single and the majority (64 percent) of them are students. Most users visit the library on a weekly basis, and on average almost all users will visit the library once a month.

Meanwhile typical library non user is aged between 21 and 30 years (54 percent), has relatively lower level of education: 27 percent have completed secondary, 19 percent – some secondary, 18 percent – completed elementary. In comparison with library users, among library non users are more women (52 percent) and a greater share have families (39 percent).

*Picture 1. Social portrait of typical library user and non user (Source: Survey of library users and non users, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)*

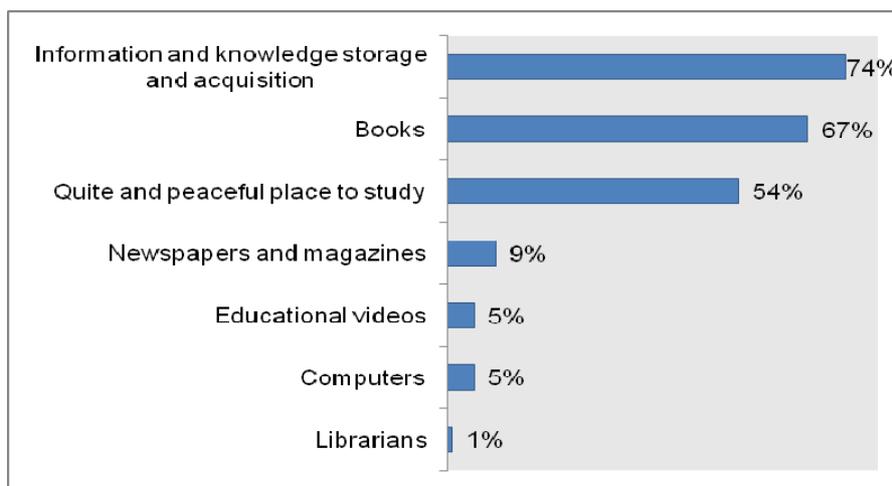


74 percent of library users talk about their library use experience, mainly with friends or adult family members. Maybe partly for this reason, the awareness of library presence in the area is quite high - across all countries, about half (53%) of library non users are aware of the presence of libraries in their localities. The majority of non users across all countries claim that being busy is a key barrier to usage of libraries (64 percent). Data indicates, that relevant books would be the key motivator to likely future usage as almost half (45%) of non users cite this as a key element that would get them into libraries. Other important influencers would be more convenient locations (36 percent) and longer opening hours (35 percent).

However, libraries are valued and are seen as important both by library users and non users. Users appreciate the value of libraries to both the individual as well as the community while non users tend to see libraries as essential to the community but not necessarily to themselves.

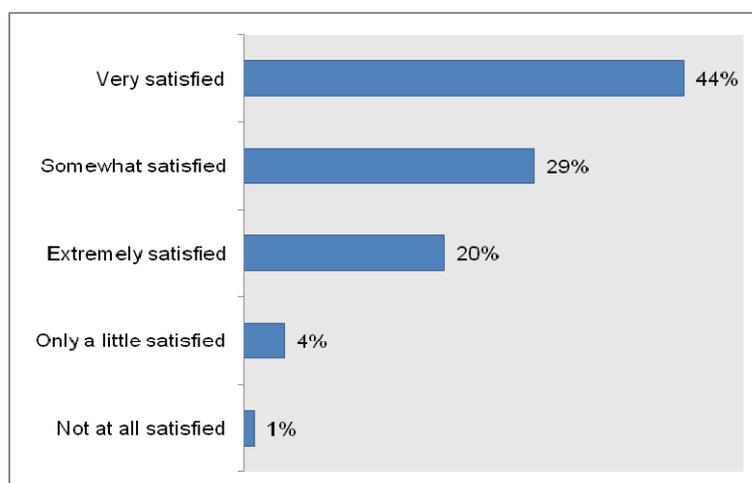
As regards to the associations with libraries, for both users and non users libraries are mainly related with books and a quiet place to study. Only a small percent of people associate libraries with technologies (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1. Spontaneous associations of users with libraries (Source: Survey of library users and non users, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)



It is obvious that staff play an important role in the libraries as 68 percent of users ask a librarian for help and consultations. The majority of users positively evaluate the help and consultations they received: 20 percent are extremely satisfied and 44 very satisfied with the service. In addition to consultations, 54 percent of users use reference materials, 49 percent take out books and 45 percent use library as a space to study (diagram 2).

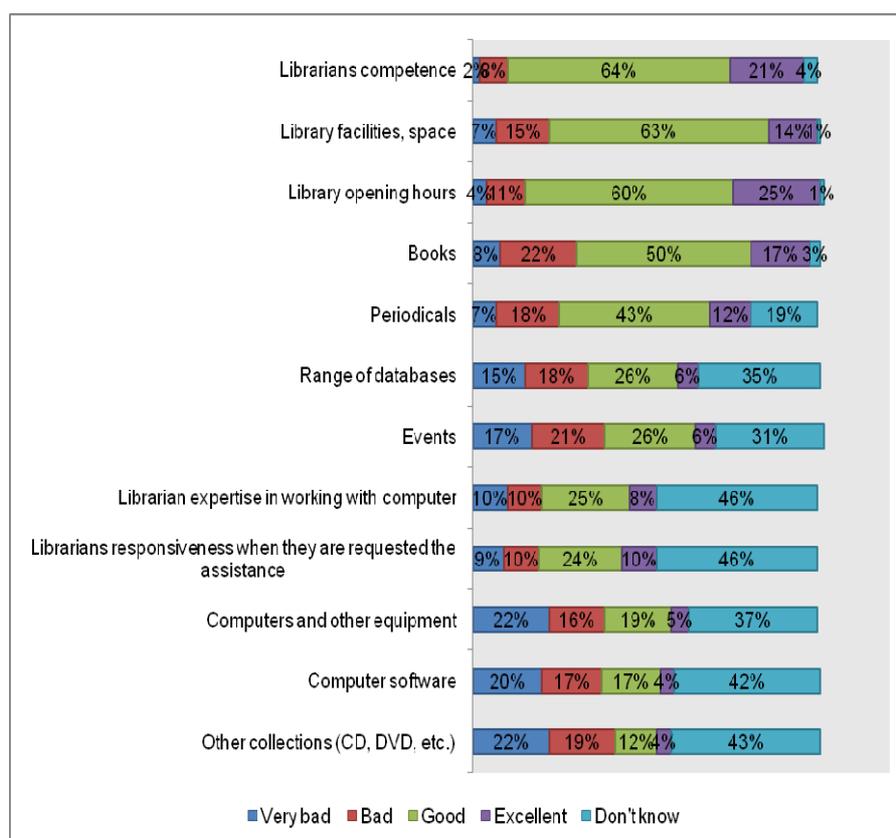
Diagram 2. Users' satisfaction with Librarian's help (Source: Survey of library users and non users, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)



The key reason for using libraries is education with about 90 percent in all countries using the libraries for this purpose. Among library non users' libraries are also seen as a place to develop new skills or learn something new (90 percent) or getting helpful information for learning (78 percent).

The highest rated aspects of library work are the competence of librarians, library facilities and opening hours. Computing and digital resources in libraries are rated lowest and this is further emphasized on the poor rating of librarians' skills on the same topic. It's also worth noting that there are significant levels of concern regarding books and periodicals with 30% citing dissatisfaction with books and 25% citing dissatisfaction with periodicals (Diagram 3). The data suggests that the look and feel of the physical space are the key drivers of satisfaction. Meanwhile, the key driver for dissatisfaction with libraries is relevance of materials available for users.

Diagram 3. Users' ratings on different library aspects (Source: Survey of library users and non users, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)

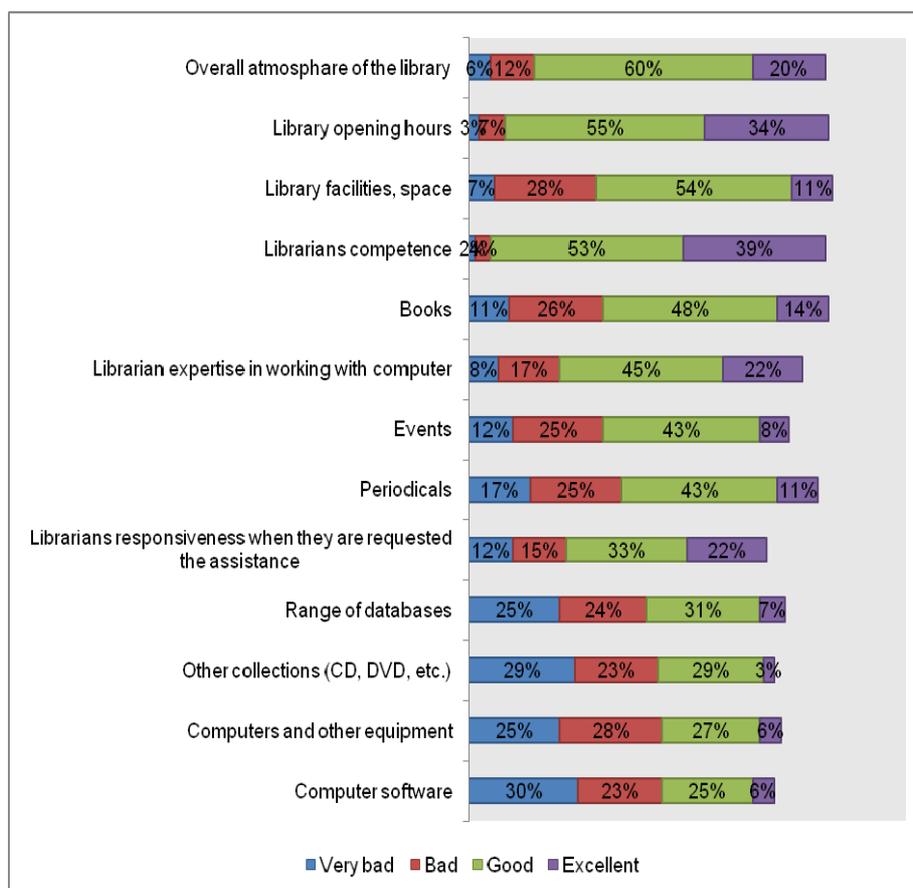


### 1.4.2. Librarians

The survey of librarians shows that the traditional definition and role of libraries for lending of books still a key element of services offered by libraries in all the countries. However, a huge number of users seeking advice and consultation suggest that the presence and competence of the librarian is vital. Digital services such as CDs, videos and computer and internet services are not readily available across all countries.

The overall atmosphere of the library is rated good and librarians also rate themselves highly on competence. Despite the claim by librarians about their good expertise working with the computer, the 'digital library' space is rated the poorest (diagram 4).

Diagram 4. Librarians' ratings on different library aspects (Source: Survey of librarians, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)



Like the other target groups investigated, librarians see learning and developing skills as key benefits from using the library (96 percent). 41 percent of librarians claim that they would like to provide computer and internet access services in their libraries.

In the view of librarians libraries are generally considered friendly, but they are lacking in technology and modernity both of which receive a rather low rating across all countries. The main challenges faced by libraries are minimal reading space, limited number of books, few computers, lack of funding, inadequate staff, lack of current information and outdated books. If more funding was provided the great majority (86 percent) of librarians would give top priority to equipment. However not only the technologies, but also a training program for librarians on skills to provide technology related library services would be necessary to better equip them in this technology evolving world. Currently 38 percent of librarians feel insufficient to provide technology related services.

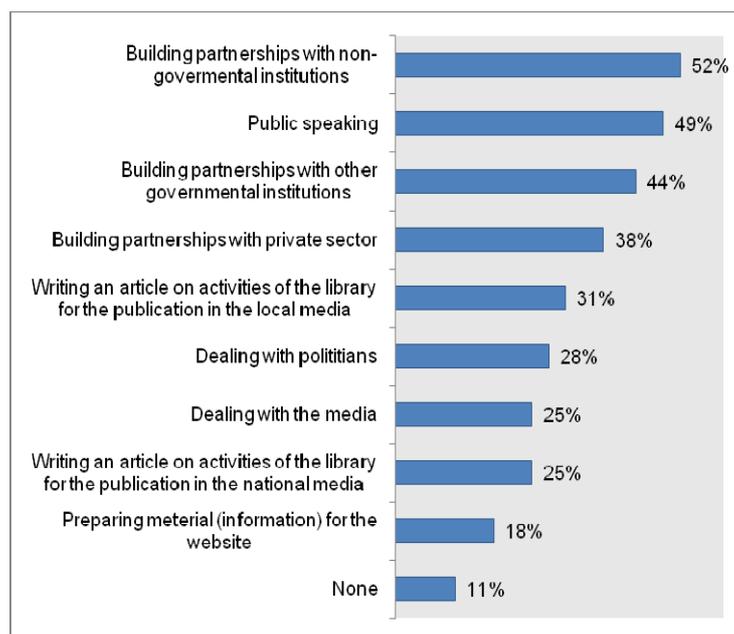
As regards the impact on the community, librarians claim that learning and development of literacy are the main areas where libraries create an impact. In the context of economic development the lending and borrowing functions of the library are positively seen as a way for users to save money. Librarians also positively evaluate their abilities to improve the health of individuals and communities by providing access to health information. In the opinion of the librarians, less impact is coming through using on-line services. This is most likely due to low internet usage in libraries. Therefore currently more impact is coming through face to face interactions.

Librarians believe that they provide access and promote local content. However, slightly less of them claim that libraries venture into promotion of culture through relevant events. Librarians consider

libraries as being very effective as a channel for dissemination of government information as well as in most areas touching on agriculture. Due to the lack of technologies and relevant skills, librarians see libraries as having less impact in providing free access to information technology.

Although librarians consider that they have impact in many areas, there seems to be a lack of pro-activeness in terms of building partnerships with institutions that could help to maximize these impacts. Also there is a need for librarians to develop advocacy skills that would help them promote their visibility in communities through the mass media (diagram 5).

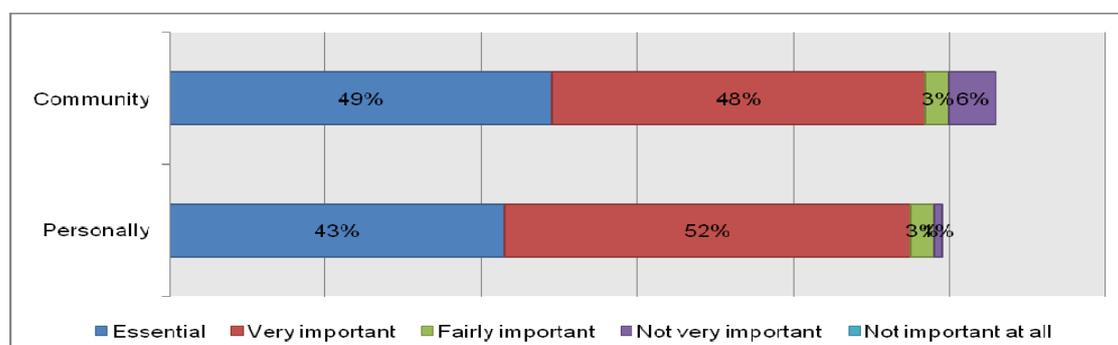
Diagram 5. Advocacy means used by librarians (Source: Survey of librarians, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)



### 1.4.3. Local and national officials

The survey of local officials revealed that libraries are considered essential both by the representatives of local municipalities who fund libraries in the area and the ones who do not fund them (diagram 6).

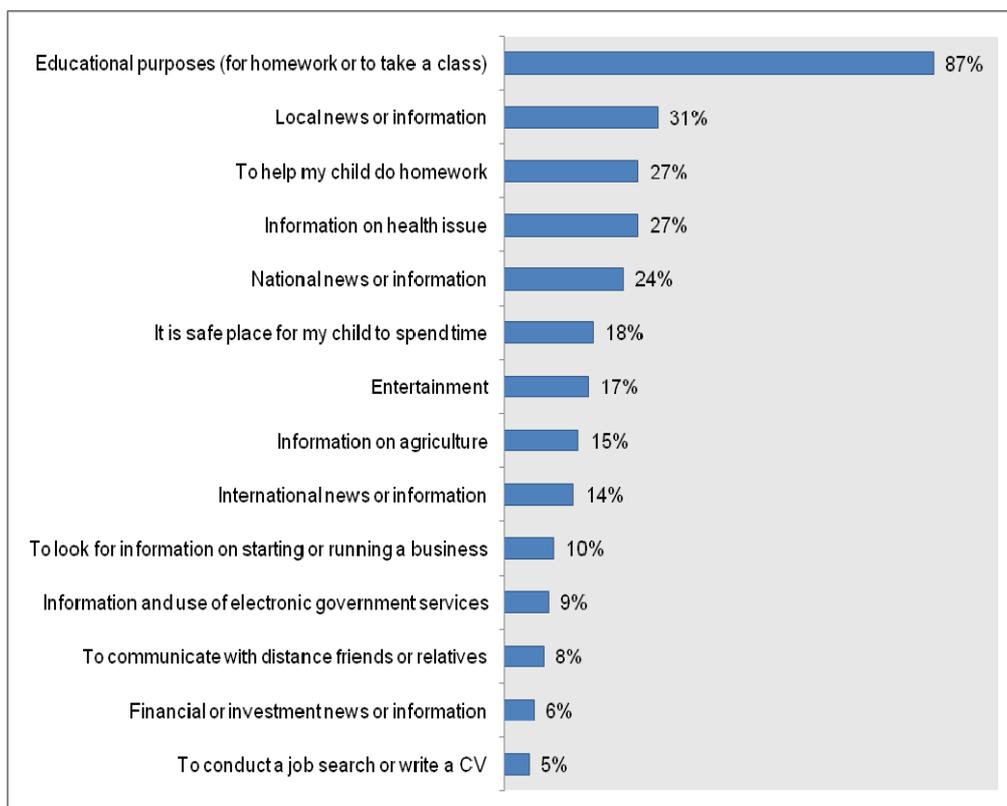
Diagram 6. Rating (in percent) of library importance (Source: Survey of local officials, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)



The main reasons for satisfaction with library services concern the physical library environment i.e. ambience and convenience. Staff is also an important driver of satisfaction. Overall satisfaction with current library services is not very high with only 55 percent saying they are fairly or very satisfied with the service. The highest rated aspects are library opening hours (77% rating as good and excellent) and librarians' competence (69% rating either good or excellent). The main reasons for dissatisfaction are the lack of relevant materials and computers as well as limited space.

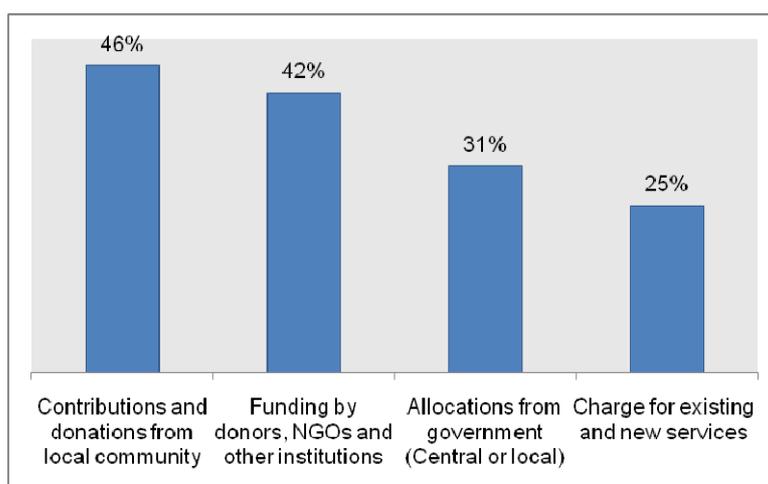
It is quite clear that libraries are associated with the very traditional roles of lending books and providing a study environment for educational purposes. The top three benefits of visiting libraries are developing new skills, obtaining new ideas and getting helpful information. 87 percent of the municipalities who fund local libraries mention education suggesting that libraries are mainly seen as extensions of institutions for formal education (diagram 7).

*Diagram 7. Main purposes of library use (Source: Survey of local officials, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)*



It is interesting to note that 96 percent of representatives of municipalities who do not fund libraries agree that public libraries deserve more funding. 36 percent of them state that they have considered funding a public library in their area. However, among the representatives of the municipalities who currently fund libraries, a big proportion has no plans to increase funding. For those who have plans to increase funding, the budgets are planned to be increased mainly for books and maintenance of the physical building. Most believe that funding for libraries will come from local or international donations. Very few mention government allocations as a possible option for municipal operation of libraries (diagram 8).

Diagram 8. Local officials opinion on how to fund libraries (Source: Survey of local officials, EIFL and TNS Research International, 2011)



As regards to the library impact, local stakeholders are highly convinced that public libraries can contribute to solving community issues. Among the main challenges that could be addressed by libraries, poverty of communities as well as illiteracy issues are mentioned the most frequently.

Stakeholders claim that in the field of education libraries are mainly contributing to normal school learning for children and general improvement of literacy. In the field of economic development they are seen as impactful in providing access to information and new ideas. In terms of health, it seems that the information on health is available in the libraries. However, they could do more in promoting health issues through facilitating health related events.

Local stakeholders claim, that libraries provide a forum for meeting and building relationships. However untapped opportunities to further strengthen this role through the means of electronic communication to reach distant friends and family. Surprisingly, libraries are not seen as a venue for local cultural events nor as a collector and promoter of local content. Libraries' roles in contributing to local community development, providing meeting space and access to local information as well as serving as the agents for social cohesion are also evaluated relatively lower.

In the opinion of local stakeholders, libraries could do more in ensuring citizen empowerment. In future this role could be strengthened through providing access and promotion of e-government information and services. Another potential area for impact is agriculture where libraries could impact communities through providing access to weather information, pricing in the market, developing, scheduling, planting and maintaining crops etc.

Representatives of municipalities who currently fund libraries believe that libraries have greater impact on health and agriculture. It is possible that these two areas have tangible outcomes that are real to the users and hence the perception that impact is greater here.

Low levels of technological resources and facilities are also a major hindrance in promoting communication and interaction on the digital space. Having better equipped libraries with computers and internet access would definitely improve the impact of libraries through better access to information and networks.

In the view of national officials libraries are strongly seen aiding children's learning and contributing to the improvement of literacy. Another widely acknowledged aspect is cost saving; however actual

business related information seems to be insufficient. National officials agree that libraries have information related to health but at the same time they think that libraries are not holding events related to health. As regards to communication, libraries enable linkages through communication one on one but rarely online. Also a more proactive approach is expected from them to promote events related to culture.

There are not very strong positive sentiments regarding impact on social and community development and especially on serving the disadvantaged. Also national officials claim that libraries could do more to link citizens with governments. The deficiency in digital resources is seen as a strong barrier for provision of e-government services. Another area of opportunities seems to be agriculture, where there is a significant amount of disagreement on the libraries input.

## **1.5. Conclusions**

Public libraries are available in most countries offering the traditional service of lending of books and offering a good environment for studying. Most of them are small with limited space and are resource constrained. It is evident that most lack technology related facilities and in some cases relevant books to meet the needs of users.

Across all groups surveyed i.e. from policy level all the way to users, including non users a significant majority have very positive sentiments about libraries. However, libraries are perceived as offering studying related information and therefore an extension of the educational process.

Librarians are seen as competent to perform their traditional roles but have limitations in the technology related services. Low skill level on technology services is as a result of lacking the facilities that would enable them to improve their competency.

Libraries are seen as essential to the individual as well as communities in general. However, they need to engage with the community at a more tangible level that goes beyond providing information only e.g. facilitating community interaction with service providers of health, agriculture, culture and entrepreneurship. Going digital, which is a clear deficiency currently, would perhaps provide a new avenue where libraries would be seen as being more dynamic and innovative in reaching out to communities.

However, there is a need not only for more proactiveness in creating and maintaining innovative services that would meet the needs of local communities. It is also important for libraries to create and demonstrate their value to the community, which is going beyond lending of books and facilitating study. This is quite challenging in the light of a significant number of librarians admitting to lacking the necessary skills for advocating for greater visibility and stronger support.

One of the research results was the locally adapted library perceptions research methodology. The methodology developed combines quantitative and qualitative research methods and research instruments, adapted to local conditions. The empirical study helped to test it and confirmed its validity in the local context.

The study gives a rich body of knowledge to start discussions with stakeholders about the role that libraries play in the community and their potential for ensuring the development and sustainability of library services. Perhaps even more important, it starts to sign-post the way to exploring the potential of the public library to support individuals, communities and decision makers in their pursuit of improving lives and livelihoods through access to information and knowledge. The findings of the study, once validated by the library community, will constitute a substantial body of evidence that can be used to inform library management and advocacy campaigns.

More information on study can be found at EIFL website at: <http://www.eifl.net>

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