

**The Role of Public Libraries in Tackling Youth Exclusion  
(The Case of Ireland)  
And its applicability to MENA Countries**

**Dr. Azzam Elananza**  
Centre for International Studies  
Dublin City University  
Ireland.  
[elananza@yahoo.com](mailto:elananza@yahoo.com)

**Abstract**

This paper aims to investigate and examine the role that public libraries play in modern societies such as Ireland, in relation to the development of marginalised youth development, and how applicable this experience is to countries in the MENA region.

The paper highlights the difference between exclusion and marginalisation. It highlights all major activities which are carried out by public libraries in Ireland in relation to their approach to exclusion.

The paper begins by considering the dimensions of the social exclusion of children and young people, including poverty and its relationship with exclusion. The paper then considers marginalised youth's use of public libraries including access to library services and the affect of local and national initiatives on library provisions. Public libraries needs to tackle social exclusion as their main purpose, and recommendations towards this end are made at the end of this paper, as how MENA countries can benefit from the Irish experience in this regard.

**Introduction**

There is currently much concern within the European Union including Ireland about the exclusion of young people, and in particular, there is concern about the large numbers of young people who have fallen out of the education, training and employment system. The social institutions which have conventionally structured young people's lives and integrated them into the formal social fabric. (Watts and Mc Carthy, 1998, p. 3)

Within the MENA region , not only is this a serious concern, but there is also considerable childhood poverty, very high rates of illiteracy together with the effects of negligence and class discrimination , mean that many children and young people are socially excluded. Recent work by Fauzee Al- Khateeb has concentrated on the effects of this- and on the means to tackle social exclusion. He stated that "poor education and poor opportunities for young people are common problems in most Arab countries. The problem gets worse as you move from poor country to poorer". (Al-Khateeb 2006, p. 10)

**Overview of Youth Exclusion**

It should be noted from the outset that preventing youth exclusion requires the involvement of many agencies and organisations through co-ordinating the efforts of all those interested in this area. However, the prevention of youth exclusion will continue to be an issue of major debate world-wide. Financial circumstances are major factor in youth exclusion. Poverty and disadvantaged circumstances were more evident in the childhood of the adults with basic skills difficulties and their parents were the least likely to have experienced post-16 education. Books were also less common in their homes when they were children. (Parsons and Bynner, 1998, p. 9)

Sociologist Francisco Antonio Cano, From the Youth Council of Spain (CJE), expressed his belief that the concept of democracy is linked to the concepts of participation and citizenship.

Citizenship means granting rights to citizens. Nowadays, jobs are the gateways to social rights. It was assumed that in the post-war welfare state we would all be employed but what happens when employment is not the norm? People who do not have a job cease to exist; all of a sudden in the post-industrial society countless citizens no longer enjoy the rights of the welfare state because they no longer have a job. All too often we are unaware that these people exist because they do not appear on official statistics. We must acknowledge that exclusion differs from marginalisation because it is never voluntary but always imposed, often with no knowledge of why.

Social exclusion is a challenge for society. We must work together to find other ways in and should perhaps consider a U-turn. Some groups are more likely to be socially excluded because of their age, race, gender, special needs and so on. It is not easy to find a way onto the labour market and exclusion can take place very quickly. The democracy that we have must be rectified; the very term `democracy` has been detached from participation and citizenship. (Byrne, 1999, p. 10)

The major hurdles facing young people are to find a job and a place to live. The agendas of young people are conducive to exclusion. Their overriding aim is to find a job and a home, and the significance of the process is lost. For example, the social value of education is the process rather than the marks obtained.

The proposal to empower civil society in the future is by making participation in itself valuable. Any kind of participation should be based on four points: motivation to participate, knowledge, suitable structure and pinpointing the reason for participation.

Participation should not be an end. Participating means making somebody part of something; we must not allow participation to mean merely discourse. (Combat poverty Agency 2004, p. 16)

### **Public Libraries and Youth Exclusion**

The public Library continues to be one of the most popular of public services, a view shared by library users and non-users alike.

In Ireland, Public libraries are increasingly playing important role in strengthening the skills of the youth. Library based youth programmes, especially in low –income communities, can teach its users specific job skills at the same time that they make libraries more visible assets in the community. (The library council, 2006).

Many of the youth using public libraries in Ireland reported that through their involvement in library based youth programmes they learned technology, developed of such qualities as patience and perseverance, experienced a sense of confidence and responsibility, and increased their knowledge about the library.

It should be noted that amongst the many issues that public libraries try to deal with in helping the youth are: improving literacy rates, tackling drug use, tackling unemployment, tackling homelessness, in addition to other matters which would be highlighted in this paper.

Stock selection is one of the key methods by which libraries can begin to make an impact on social exclusion (although it still seems possible to produce a report on the topic without mentioning social issues. (Chambers and Stoll, 1996).

Combat Poverty Agency, The Major Irish Organisation working for the prevention and elimination of poverty, stated that: *“As part of its work to support the development of solutions to tackle poverty and social exclusion, Combat Poverty has been assisting local authorities to develop anti-poverty social inclusion strategies, and to focus on the poverty and social inclusion*

*impact in all functional areas. The recognition that local authorities are key stakeholders in progressing local anti-poverty strategies was the basis for the establishment of the Local Government Anti-Poverty Learning Network (LGAPLN) in 2000. The network was established in collaboration with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and local Government and the Office for Social inclusion (OSI) in the Department of Social and Family Affairs.” (Combat poverty 2004, p. 4)*

The library service delivered by local authorities plays a key role in addressing social exclusion in terms of the provision of information and resources. Significant gaps can emerge between those who have access to information and education and those who do not. The library service is well placed to provide access to publications, the internet, and a wide range of activities for those most marginalised across urban and rural areas, at a cost appropriate to their means.

Staffs from libraries in local authorities have made a significant contribution to the activities and meetings of the Learning Network since it was established. Through sharing experience at Learning Network meetings, it became apparent that there were differences in approaches regarding access to the library service for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Consequently in 2003, Combat Poverty contracted Fitzpatrick associates to research what strategies are in place to ensure access. (*ibid*)

### **The role of Public Libraries**

In the words of the UNESCO *Public Library Manifesto*, the local gateway to knowledge provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.

The *Branching Out* report described the public library “not as a building or an institution, but as a resource to be used by people”. The report identified three pillars upon which the service rests:

- It is a resource for Information and Learning
- It is a resource for Culture and the Imagination
- It is a resource for Children and Young people

In the planning and delivery of its many activities and services, the public library has at its heart commitment to providing both a literal and a virtual “space for all”. In describing this commitment, the public Library Manifesto state: “the services of the public Library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. (IFA and UNESCO, 1994)

The services of local authority public libraries are open to everyone in a very real sense. Firstly, there are no entry requirements at all: anyone may come in the doors of the Library. Secondly, a visitor does not need to have any reason to enter the library: those who wish to come in to do nothing are as welcome as those who come in with something to do. Thirdly, the financial costs for using the library are either non-existent or very low. Fourthly, through the range of services and the depth and breadth of the collections, libraries endeavours to provide something for everyone. (Public Libraries Manifesto, 1994)

The library council of Ireland stated that public libraries continues to be one of the most popular of public services, a view shared by library users and non-users alike. Over two thirds of the country’s adults (aged 15+) are or have been members of a public library, while 36% have used their public library recently. Despite fears to the contrary, people continue to have a huge appetite for reading, with the borrowing of books being the most popular reason by far for visiting a public library (79%).

Library users are benefiting from increases in spending on library stock (66% since 1998) as a remarkable 94% of visitors to a library recently consider their visit to have been successful. This level of satisfaction is also evident from the large number of people who use their public library regularly. (The library council, undated leaflet)

76% of user visits the library at least once a month, while 45% are weekly users. User's satisfaction is not only about getting a good book: in the user survey of 2002 98% of users rated the help they received from the library staff as good or very good. The public library's profile in the community remains high: 82% of non users (90% of female non-users) know where their public library is.

Public libraries provide a wide range of services in addition to lending books, and awareness of these services is reasonably high among non-users. However, it is also clear that many people who have not used the library in recent years are not fully aware of the various services on offer. Only 50% knew that internet access is provided; even fewer knew that talking books could be borrowed, while only 15% knew that they could get application forms for things like motor tax and passports, at the library.

Reading groups and reading promotion are among the most popular activities organised by public libraries and the 62% of non –users who didn't know about them are certainly missing out. These findings suggest that more needs to be done to let the public know what kind of services the modern public library provides.

Not all those who would like to use the library can, as 'no time' was the main reason given by members and non-members alike. Indeed, 'better opening hours' was identified by many people as something that would encourage them to get to the library. Non-users also suggested that a better selection of books and more CDs and DVDs would entice them to use the service.

Public libraries strive to provide "a space for all" and they do attract a broad cross-section of society. However, it is a cause for concern that non-users are most likely to be in the lower socio-economic brackets: can more be done to target services at these non-users.

In general women use libraries more than men (75%-60%) while those in the 35-44 age groups, and those over 64, use them slightly more than other age groups. (*ibid*)

### **Irish Government policy towards the role of public libraries**

Irish government policy has imposed on public libraries the task of promoting social inclusion by drawing in non users while continuing to cater for the, often incompatible, needs of existing users. It offers advice on how to establish the extent to which non users are "excluded" by creating a community profile based on a SMART formulation of aims and objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound) and proceeding to gather information on the composition of the local population using the Internet and discussion with focus groups. This is exactly what needs to be done in all Middle Eastern and North African countries if the full benefit of public libraries were to be realised.

Accesses to public libraries for marginalised groups have been at the forefront of Irish Organisations efforts tackle youth exclusion and marginalisation.

The library Service delivered by public libraries plays a key role in addressing youth exclusion in terms of provision of information and resources. Clear gaps can emerge between those who have access to information and education and those who do not. Public Library service is well placed to provide its youth users with good access to publication, the internet, and a wide range activity for those most marginalised across urban concentrations. (The Library Council 2006, pp. 2-5)

## Services provided by the public library

Public libraries provide a wide range of services in addition to lending books, and awareness of these services is reasonably high among young users. The services also include talking books, and application forms for passports, motor tax, etc. can be obtained. Reading groups and promotions are amongst the most popular activities organised by public libraries, i.e. CDs, DVDs, internet access, language laboratories, etc.

Amongst the many services provided for the youth by public libraries in Ireland are the following:

- Tackling homelessness – On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April Actor Gerard Byrne, better known as ‘Malachy’ from *Fair City*, Lunched an initiative by TRUST and the understating of the needs of homeless. The initiative aims to make a special DVD entitled Building Trust in the Community available to the public and in which Gerard also features, through all of the country’s public libraries. Alice Leahy, Director and Co-ordinator of Trust said; “We have been very heartened by the encouragement and support we have received for this initiative from libraries and library staff in all parts of the country, especially as they represent as a very unique network that reaches into every community town and village.”
- Tackling drug-use- A clear example of Irish regards is a very recent and courageous initiative. A new drug awareness initiative *Empower* will be launched in Ireland in June 2006. Copies of the new *Empower* DVD and poster will be distributed through the 32 public library authorities to reach each of the 380 public library service points around Ireland in May 2006 in readiness for the national launch of the Empower campaign will encourage parents, teenagers and the community at large to educate themselves about drug addictions in Ireland, and to empower themselves in a positive way in the struggle against drug abuse in Ireland. (The library council, 2006, pp. 1-2)

Ireland can learn from the experience of library councils in other countries in terms of engaging marginalised groups and developing strategies to ensure access to the library service. Ireland benefited a lot from more advanced countries especially from the British experience in the field of public libraries. Middle Eastern and Northern African countries can also benefit from the way Irish policy makers attitude in using the experience of more advanced western countries to tackle youth exclusion.

## Conclusions

It is obvious that public libraries are playing very important role to deal with problems faced by young people in Ireland, especially those who are excluded for a number of factors. This role varies from one local authority to another. It is also clear that the role of each public library is governed by many considerations including type of problems, the needs of excluded youths, and the financial resources available. Nonetheless, the services provided to those marginalised youth are of great importance in improving the quality of their lives and offering them real hope for the future.

Unemployment, illiteracy, drug use, homelessness are major issues which are being dealt with by public libraries in Ireland by providing computer training, internet access, and other services.

It was evident that public libraries had to cooperate with many agencies and groups to succeed in tackling youth problems. It was also vital for public libraries to create a community profile based on a smart formulation of aims and objectives. A lengthy and detailed discussion with Focus groups was at the forefront of public libraries approach to youth exclusion.

It is very clear that Arab countries are still far behind in terms of employing public libraries to deal with problems faced by millions of young people through out the Middle East and North Africa. It is also obvious that local authorities and indeed regional governments do not appreciate the full benefit which might be achieved through employing public libraries to deal with the many issues facing young people. This can only happen if policy makers throughout the Arab world commit themselves to allocate suitable resources especially financial resources to enable public libraries to deal with the many problems facing young people.

## **Recommendations**

In the light of the Irish experience and efforts in tackling youth exclusion the following recommendations to public library authorities in the Middle East and North Africa are suggested:

- In the MENA countries, library based youth programmes should be designed and tailored towards major problems facing young people in these countries. Each local authority public library should gear these programmes and services towards the particular problems of the people in that particular area. These services should include the following:
  1. Access to publications such as lending books
  2. Learning technology
  3. tackling drug use through awareness campaigns, sessions and classes
  4. tackling unemployment
  5. providing free internet access
  6. Access to talking books
  7. Application Forms for passports, driving licence, motor tax can be obtained
  8. Photocopying facilities
  9. CDs, DVDs, and Language Laboratories
  10. Access to daily newspapers
  11. Meeting room for discussing certain issues important to the community.
  
- The most important recommendation in my view is the mapping out of excluded youth in terms of their numbers, ages, social class, religious and ethnic backgrounds, educational level, and other background consideration in public libraries. Such a major task requires the authorities to make available resources of all kinds to public libraries authorities in the Middle East and North Africa.
- Youth inclusion should be mainstreamed as a policy priority within all library and information services in Arab countries.
- Library authorities should consider what specific services need to be tailored to meet the needs of youth groups in Arab countries.
- Library authorities should consult and heavily involve socially excluded groups, in particular the youth, in order to ascertain their needs and aspirations.
- Public libraries should be located in areas where there is a demand but should build upon existing facilities and services where ever possible.
- Opening hours should be more flexible and tailored to reflect the needs and interests of the youth and that can only be determined through proper consultation with youth excluded groups in Arab countries.
- Library and information services should develop their role as community which is relevant to the real needs of the youth.
- Library authorities should consider whether some services aimed at socially excluded people might be more effectively delivered on a regional basis.

The Image of public libraries should be improved in the eyes of excluded youth and, therefore, public libraries should be very attractive and seen as a visible asset in the community. Public

libraries in the MENA region should create a community profile based on a SMART formulation of aims and objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound). Libraries should also gather information on the composition of the local population using the internet and discussion with Focus Groups.

### **Bibliography**

1. Al-Khateeb, Fauzee, 2006, the role of public libraries in tackling marginalised people in the Arab World. Unpublished article. Senior Librarian at Yarmouk University. Jordan.
2. Byrne, D. (1999), *Social exclusion*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
3. Chambers, - and Stoll, 1996, *Book Selection in Public libraries*. London: British Library research Dept.
4. Combat poverty Agency, 2004, *Access to Public Libraries for Marginalised groups*, Ireland.
5. Department of the Environment and Local Government, *Branching Out: New Public Library Service* (Dublin, 1998), 16.
6. Emily Dickenson, 'I dwell in possibility', In H. Johnson(ed.), *the poems of Emily Dickenson* ( Harvard , 1951)
7. International Federation of Library Association ( IFLA) and UNESCO, *Public Library Manifesto* ( 1994: see (<http://www.ifla.org/VII/s8/unesco/eng/htm>)
8. The library Council, May 2006, *Irish Library News* No.260, Ireland.
9. The Library Council, April 2006, *Realising Potential: The Public Library Service and Cultural Inclusion*. Ireland
10. The library Council, *Public Library Authority Statistics: Actuals, 2003* (Dublin, 2006), 1.
11. The Library Council, *Public Library Authority Estimates of Expenditure, 2006*(Dublin, 2006).
12. Parsons, S. and Bynner,J. 1998, *Influences on adult basic skills: factors affecting the development of literacy and numeracy from birth to 37*. Basic Skills Agency.
13. Watts, A.G. and McCarthy, J(1998), *Training in community based guidance: a formative evaluation of developmental guidance project in four European countries, funded under the European commission's LEONRDO Da Vinci programme*. Dublin: National Centre for Guidance in Education.

