# Library services in latin america: an approach to mobilize social capital as a source for development: The Colombian case

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**Abstract:**

*The first part of this document explores how the evidence of current social problems, characterized by exclusion and inequality phenomena, has required a broader study of what development means in a society. When considering the progress of a society as an integral process, the importance of including aspects such as culture in development programs is acknowledged, mainly if the potential to bring people together is taken into account. Finally, it is argued that the concept of social capital has been highly valuable to understand how union between people generates development.*

*This framework is essential to understand what is the role of public libraries and its services, especially in Colombia, from the potential that the cultural sector has to generate cohesion and to contribute to the development of a nation.*

*The second part explores, in the first place, how public libraries are the ideal scenery for cultural action and how social capital of the communities is mobilized through its services. In the second place, the experience of the National Library of Colombia and the National Network of Public Libraries in the development process of three innovative services that search to generate new connections and relationships between people is reviewed. For each service the following elements are explored: i) its methodological, pedagogical and didactic characteristics, ii) how the use of technology is involved, and iii) how each of them contributes respectively to the social capital mobilization of their communities, strengthening the collective self-esteem, creating values of tolerance to difference and empathy, and promoting social inclusion.*

**Keywords:** library services, social capital, collective self-esteem, social inclusion.

**Introduction:**

Public libraries, as cultural institutions, are essential spaces for the integral development of communities. This is especially true if limitations of economic development to generate equity by itself are considered, as well as the social challenges faced by Colombia, highly akin with the problems of most Latin American countries. Particularly, calls the attention the role that libraries can have as a means for social capital mobilization at local level, since cohesion and strong confidence ties between people are essential for collective welfare.

To strengthen the potential of public libraries to generate the development, the National Library of Colombia, as entity responsible to coordinate the National Network of Public Libraries in the country, designed a proposal for implementing innovative library services in 1.000 public libraries of Colombia. The proposal is focused in the development of movie clubs, processes to recover the local photographic memory and the development of self-organized learning workshops. In all cases, these services involve the community in a horizontal basis, inculcate the use of technologies and invite communities to dialogue, but their main characteristic is the potential they have to contribute to the mobilization of social capital of communities in three key areas: strengthening of collective self-esteem, formation of values of tolerance to difference and empathy, and social inclusion.

This document shall explore the relationship of culture, social capital and development in the Colombian context, as well as the role of public libraries in the development process of the country. Further on, we will study in depth the design of the three innovative services that are currently deployed in the National Network of Public Libraries, and we will study the possibilities that each of them offers to mobilize the social capital at the local level.

## FIRST PART

### I.  The paradigm of development

In the last decades, the conditions of economic and social development have reached a level with no precedents worldwide. The production capacity and the technological advance have placed people as never before, in a complex global network of economic and cultural activities. During the Twentieth Century, democratic and participation systems were established as predominant forms of government; it was also possible for the global political rhetoric to integrate key concepts in Human Rights and that in average, human life expectancy is the highest than ever before in history.

However, it has been more evident that broad groups of the population have been excluded from this "progress wave" and still live in an environment characterized by lack and oppression. Coexistence of these two realities, that of those enjoying the opportunities of development, and that of those that are excluded from its benefits, has required to perform an academic and philosophical inquiry of the meaning of development.

An important contribution in this regard is derived from contemporary studies that have extensively studied the phenomenon of inequality, since it has been found that while countries with the lowest average development levels have converged with respect to those with higher development indexes, divergences within countries have increased significantly. In other words, countries are more equal between each other but internal inequalities of most of them have worsened. This phenomenon confirms the economic growth and market limitations to produce by themselves conditions that allow the entire community to share material and human progress in an equitable basis. This evidence, as previously stated, has forced economists and the academic community to rigorously consider a definition of development that transcends the income per capita.

One of the main voices that, in the above described problems, has proposed a wider development view has been proposed by the Nobel of Economy Amrtya Sen, whose postulate proposes to enrich this concept, conceiving it as the expansion process of real freedoms enjoyed by people. Thanks to contributions as those of Sen, the debate on development has progressed and generated a consensus on the need to conceive development as an integral process, involving economic, social and human

aspects. This has enabled in its turn, to study more rigorously the contribution made by social aspects, such as culture to the development progress

## II.        Culture as means and goal of development

To address the relationship between culture and development, it is worth, as proposed by Sen, to consider the role of culture both i) as means and ii) as the goal itself of development. The first dimension acknowledges the power of culture to mobilize different social processes, to the extent that it has the possibility to influence human behavior. The second dimension implies that beyond the results culture may generate in other aspects of the life of a community, the cultural development is a goal in itself. Therefore, cultural manifestations, as alive in the daily life of a community are essential due to their close relationship with the "way of life" of citizens.

Although these two dimensions that link culture with development (i.e. as means and as a goal in itself of development) are not exclusive and constantly act upon reality, considering the Latin American context characterized by persistence of inequality, by social exclusion of some sectors of the population and for violence outbreaks in the political life of their populations, among others, culture has special relevance as a means to rebuild the social tissue of communities and to contribute to the development process of citizens.

## III.        Culture and social capital in Colombia

During decades of violent struggle between Colombians, mediated by political differences, exclusion, drug trafficking and by arms among others, it is just natural that the social tissue of the country has deteriorated. This results in the loss of trust between people that entails decreased interactions among them and the consequent isolation of citizens. In other words, the conflict has divided the Colombians which results paradoxical if it is taken into account that the indigenous and African traditions of Latin America "still highly alive in peasants' economies, the community forms of life have always been central. That is, the Latin culture has deep roots of union and life in community, but in countries such as Colombian it has been weakened for the adverse conditions of its contemporary social context, which has been strongly marked by violence.

Thus, in the light of the violent context prevailing in Colombia during the last decades of the twentieth century, which worsened the atomization of the society, the manner of conceiving the culture in Colombia was forced to change in a drastic form. Therefore, at the time of drafting the current political constitution issued in 1991, it was clarified that culture was destined to unite and not to divide Colombian people. We should not speak about "cult people" commonly represented by educated people and with western traditions, and "uncultured" represented by the population with a lower level of education and indigenous, African and mestizo traditions. On the contrary, the Political Constitution acknowledged Colombia as a multi-cultural and multi-ethnical country and reaffirmed that the origin of the Colombian cultural identity aligned with the rest of Latin America is originated in its diversity. In other words, the Constitution of 1991 gave a deep sense to the role that culture plays in Colombia as a means to generate development, especially due to the potential to generate cohesion and respect from the difference.

Now then, why is it important to bring people together in order to generate development? Professors as Robert Putnam or James Coleman developed this idea around the concept of social capital. These two professors were the pioneers in the research of how the social capital is an important factor of development. Notwithstanding the accurate definition of social capital continues to evolve, both Putnam as Coleman revealed some of the essential aspects to understand the concept: social capital is made up by the degree of confidence existing between the social actors of a society, the civic behavior standards practiced, and the association level, are all elements that evidence the richness and strength of the social tissue. In other words, a united society that enables people to interact more frequently and with more quality (i.e. from confidence, respect and tolerance relationships) has a greater social capital.

Additionally, the study of the social capital has been relevant, among other things, thanks to the bridge it means to understand the strong relationships between culture and development, due to the potential of culture as a factor of social cohesion and union. Culture "enables people to be mutually recognized, to grow as a group and to develop their collective self-esteem, and in this way it has a huge importance for mobilization of social capital and to produce development" (Kliksberg, 1999). This, as above mentioned, is highly relevant for Colombia, taking into account the damage that violence and exclusion have generated in the social tissue of the country, and ratifies the importance of making of culture an important part of the development strategies of Latin America in general.

**SECOND PART**

### IV.    Public libraries in the Colombian context

Public libraries, as cultural spaces, have three characteristics that are worth to be rescued to understand their specific potential to mobilize the social capital in Colombia. In the first place, public libraries are inclusive institutions by definition: They are for all publics, from children to seniors and always have doors open. In the second place, public libraries conduce to the connection between people: either through reading, knowledge or access to information they open positive meeting places for the community. Lastly, the network of public libraries form the largest cultural infrastructure of Colombia: the National Network of Public Libraries that gathers the different departmental and municipal networks of public libraries, currently has 1424 ascribed libraries.

With this context under consideration, the development of library services, which are the main means of interaction between the public library and its community, it is essential to exploit the potential of the culture as a factor to generate integral development in Colombia. Consequently, the National Library and the National Network of Public Libraries have launched a strategy that shall take place between 2016 and 2017, addressed to encourage the development of innovative library services, in at least 1000 public libraries.

Methodologically the innovative library services involve the community actively, trying to generate a horizontal relationship between the librarian and the users of the library, articulated by dialogue. This implies that services open a space for collective construction in which the opinion of all users are taken into account and knowledge may arise from the community itself. On the other hand, all services inculcate the use of technologies as key tools to further the activities of the public library, given the enormous potential of technology to connect people and to increase the opportunities of access to culture and knowledge.

To understand how the library services, for its cultural nature, have the possibility to contribute to mobilization of social capital and to the development of Colombia, hereafter are listed some relations that are worth to be taken into account to evidence how in public libraries occur the relationships between culture, social capital and development, explored in the first part of this document[1]:

a. **Library services can contribute to strengthen the collective self-esteem:** "the poorest population has no material richness, but do have a cultural background, sometimes of centuries or millenniums such as the indigenous populations. For this reason, consideration and valuation of the culture of ALL sectors is a key point for the construction of identity and collective self-esteem" (Kliksberg, 1999). Library services, due to their capacity of gathering together the community and to generate a prolific dialogue around, for example, the local memory, **allow to**

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[1] Several of these aspects correspond to the observations regarding the relationship between culture and social capital that Bernardo Kliksberg gathered form several Latin American countries in the document "Capital social y cultura, claves esenciales del desarrollo", As coordinator of the Instituto Interamericano para el Desarrollo Social (INDES) of the Interamerican Development Bank (BID).

**collectively recognize the local history and culture and in this way strengthen the collective self-esteem** and the construction of identity from diversity, honoring the direction set forth by the Colombian Constitution in this sense.

b. **Library services can contribute to generate values:** "culture makes possible for a society to generate     values and to transmit them from generation to generation. In Latin America, values as solidarity, cooperation, responsibility of one for each other… shall clearly help to the development besides contributing to create the society profile" (Kliksberg, 1999). To fully comply with the mission of constructing cultural practices that acknowledge and integrate the diversity of the Colombian society, library services have the potential to contribute to the construction of values that facilitate to reach consensus in a pacific way and to restore **tolerance to difference** as a legitimately Latin American and Colombian characteristic.

c. **Library services can contribute to social inclusion:** "democratization of culture can help to break the circles of inequity "(Kliksberg, 1999). Public libraries offer to the communities alternatives of personal growth and access to knowledge. Therefore, through the application of methodologies contributing to generate knowledge collectively, besides of contributing to dialogue and generation of consensus, **library services can help to reduce part of the gaps generating inequality in relation to knowledge and foster social inclusion**.

Below, is the revision of the Colombian case in detail, giving a careful look to each of the innovative services currently developed from public libraries exploring their pedagogical and didactic characteristics, and reviewing, from their approach, the way in which these services search to contribute to the mobilization of social capital of their communities and in this way to local development

## V.      The case of innovative library services in Colombia

The Ministry of Culture and the National Library of Colombia, within the National Reading and Writing Plan "Reading is my Story" and the Project Use and Appropriation of ICT in public libraries, set forth an initiative at the national level which purpose is to foster the development of innovative library services. This initiative proposes to the librarians the development of the following three services: i) **Photography and Memory in Public Libraries**. ii) **Movie clubs in Public Libraries** and iii) **Self-organized learning workshops in public libraries**.

The strategy to display this initiative is focused in the work of 29 professionals who are part of the team of Departmental Tutors of the National Network of Public Libraries (RNBP as per Spanish wording), who are responsible for making two site visits to each one of the libraries to teach librarians to implement the three above mentioned services, besides to defining with them a plan for the systematization of these activities in their respective libraries.

Below, it shall be explained each one of the innovative library services implemented by the National Library in the public libraries ascribed to the National Network of Public Libraries.

### 1. Photography and Memory in Public Libraries

"Safeguarding memory to preserve our identity is important since it recalls us where we came from, who we are, and how our population has evolved. For this reason from the public library we have been concerned in recovering the photographs that talk us about the old Samaniego, for our children and all the community to identify their land and customs". Lucely Narváez López, Librarian of the Municipal Public Library Cocuyos from Samaniego, department of Nariño.

The service of **Photograph and Memory in Public Libraries** searches that libraries develop community processes around the recovery of the local photographic memory. During the process, people are invited to dialogue, share, remember, socialize, and digitalize files and record stories. This

enables i) to strengthen links in the community ii) to support the collective identity and self-esteem, establishing an adequate climate to talk about local memory. In this way, the dialogue fostered through this service contributes to the mobilization of the social capital, **as a means to strengthen the collective self-esteem of communities.**

Additionally the National Library has developed a proposal for each library to share its photographic collections and local stories in an on-line platform, once the library has developed its recovery process of the local photographic memory. The objective of this action is that the work carried out by the communities is known at the national level, in order to initiate a dialogue, not only between the members of a community, but also between Colombian people from different parts of the country, taking advantage of the communication channels opened by technologies. To make it possible, the National Library of Colombia has called this national initiative **"Comparte tu Rollo"**, and has structured it in alliance with the developers of the platform Historypin (www.historypin.org), a website that has formed a global community with interest in sharing and knowing local histories.

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**PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEMORY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

- **In alliance with:** Historypin.org
- **Promotes the use of the following technological equipment:** cameras, scanners, computers and printers.
- **Early results observed:** after two months of launching this initiative, in the first 135 libraries, 3,133 attendees to the activities related with the service have been recorded. Likewise, it has been evidenced that this service promotes the participation of different age groups and motivates the inter-generational dialogue, which is essential for the construction of a collective identity.
- **Expected results:** At the end of 2017, it is expected to have photographic collections of all departments of Colombia within the framework of the initiative "Comparte tu Rollo". Furthermore, it is projected to complete more than 20.000 attendees to the activities of memory recovery fostered by this service and evidence a change in the collective self-esteem level of communities.

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### 2. Movie clubs in Public Libraries

"I believe that movie clubs allow the communities to discover other realities, and in this process to rediscover what they themselves live". Nancy Castañeda, Departmental Tutor of the National Network of Public Libraries.

The service of **Movie clubs in Public Libraries**, besides allowing the communities to enjoy the movies as an artistic and cultural expression (i.e. as a goal in itself), promotes dialogue spaces around cultural and social contexts provided by the audiovisual contents. Thus, it is intended that users of public libraries ask questions on the context of the stories they see in the movies, on their characters, on the places in which the stories take place and find agreement and disagreement points with the stories of others. This dialogue, besides inculcating in the users that every story deserves to be told, **shall be a means to form values of tolerance to difference and empathy** that are so essential in a process of peace construction, as the one currently undertaken by Colombia.

As a tool to streamline the methodological proposal of this innovative service, the National Library formalized an alliance with the online platform Cinescuela, in order to facilitate the development of movie clubs in the public libraries of Colombia, and maximize the possibilities to have access to information and knowledge with the use of technologies. This platform offers a catalogue of online movies in their original versions, which rights have been acquired to be projected in cultural and educational spaces. Additionally, Cinescuela offers pedagogical guides for each movie that allows the librarian and users of the libraries to analyze the audiovisual language and the context in which each

movie is developed, besides suggesting related questions that can be subject of discussion between attendees.

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**MOVIE CLUBS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

- **In alliance with:** Cinescuela.org
- **Promotes the use of the following technological equipment:** projector, audio system, screen, and computers.
- **Early results observed:** After implementing this service in 135 libraries, a total of 5.496 attendees have been recorded. Likewise it has been observed that approximately 72% of the population that has participated in a movie club in the first months of the implementation of the initiative is between 7 and 25 years old. The above, has special relevance, since creating tolerance to difference and empathy values in young audiences is crucial to construct a culture of respect and peaceful coexistence.
- **Expected results:** by the end of 2017, it is projected to have performed at least 3.000 movie clubs in the public libraries of Colombia and complete at least 40.000 attendees to this service. Likewise, it is projected to evidence a higher level of tolerance to difference and empathy of the attendees of the movie clubs.

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### 3. Self-organized learning workshops in public libraries

"This service shows that all of us can think. We all are able to reach answers". Young user of the public library of the municipality of San Andrés de Sotavento, department of Córdoba.

The service of **Self-organized learning workshops in public libraries** proposes a learning method based on great questions that must be chosen and answered by the participants through the use of different resources of information of the public library (i.e internet, books, magazines, audiovisuals, among others). In this process attendees dialogue, debate, research and finally reach consensus in harmony, from different points of view regarding a common question. The methodology used for the development of this service allows the collective construction of knowledge with the use of technologies and bibliographic collections of libraries, and **serves as a means to foster social inclusion**.

The following are some of the great questions observed in the Colombian public libraries that address different areas of knowledge, such as science, philosophy, arts, cultural heritage, and spirituality.
What is love? Why are we called "motilones" (Word usually used to name people of the department of Norte de Santander)? Why the world is round? If we are thinking creatures, why is ignorance so extended? Do boys think different from girls? Why humans reproduce and die?

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**GREAT QUESTIONS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

- **Based on:** SOLE methodology (Self-Organized Learning Environments).
- **Promotes the use of the following technological equipment:** computers and tablets.
- **Early result observed:** after the first months of launching of this initiative in the first 135 libraries, a total of 4.788 attendees have been recorded. 81% of participants are part of the scholar population (children and teenagers between 7 and 17 years), which promotes social integration offering possibilities of informal training and motivating the collective creation of knowledge.
- **Expected results:** by the end of 2017 it is projected to have developed at least 3.000 workshops in the public libraries of Colombia and to complete at least 40.000 attendees to this service. Likewise, it is expected to evidence a greater appropriation of knowledge in users, as a contribution to the social inclusion in communities.

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**CONCLUSION**

As it was examined throughout this document, public libraries as cultural institutions are essential spaces for the integral development of communities. Public libraries open spaces for the meeting of the community and have a significant potential to generate social cohesion, which is fundamental for the development of Colombia, in particular and Latin America in general.

The case of the National Library of Colombia and the National Network of Public Libraries results highly interesting, since it presents an original initiative to foster innovative library services, that besides gathering the community and link it with new technologies, can mobilize social capital, at the local level in three key aspects: strengthening of the collective self-esteem, creation of values of tolerance to difference and empathy and social inclusion. These elements collect the vision proposed from Colombia to think in the future of the library services for Latin America: these services besides integrating methodologies to promote the collective creation of knowledge and the use of technologies, must decidedly contribute to the mobilization of social capital, as a means to generate cohesion and development, which allows, besides, to restore the forms of communitarian life that are part of the historical richness of the Latin American peoples.

Finally, the results of the Colombian case show the general potential of culture to generate development and reinforce the need to plan the development in an integral form, including in a more protagonist way the cultural sector. This is particularly relevant if the importance of social cohesion is considered to make possible a life in peace from diversity and difference.

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