



Supporting Societies' Needs: a Model Framework  
for Developing a Policy for Libraries

**Understanding Public Libraries in Colombia**

## **Preface**

The attached case study has been developed as part of a six-month research project leading to the development of a framework for library policy for which the following key activities were included:

- desk research leading to preparation of a background paper on the history and current best practice in preparation of library policy<sup>1</sup>;
- development of case studies to illustrate forward-thinking/innovative national or sub sector library policy<sup>2</sup>;
- development of a draft library policy framework;
- facilitation of consultative meetings and workshops to discuss and finalize documents;
- publication of a model framework for library policy<sup>3</sup>.

*Understanding Public Libraries in Colombia* is adapted from the English translation of the Introduction to the *Ley de bibliotecas publicas (Law of Public Libraries)*, Bogota D.C., February 2010

Paula Marcela Moreno Zapata  
Minister of Culture:

María Claudia López  
Vice-Minister of Culture:

Ana Roda  
National Library Director

Enzo Rafael Ariza  
General Secretary

Juan Manuel Vargas  
Legal Counseling Office Chief  
Consultancy Supervisor

Texts and development:  
Gonzalo Castellanos V.

MINISTRY OF CULTURE  
Republic of Colombia

---

<sup>1</sup> NIDA *Supporting Societies' Needs: a Model Framework for Developing a Policy for Libraries: Part 1: Background*, 10pp, 2011

<sup>2</sup> NIDA *Case Studies of best practice in library policy: Colombia, Finland, Namibia, New Zealand*, 2011

<sup>3</sup> NIDA *A Model Framework for Library Policy*, 2011

## Understanding Public Libraries in Colombia

### What are we talking about?

“He who opens a Library door, closes a prison” is one of the many ideas attributed to Victor Hugo. Beyond the certainty of the French author having written this sentence, the notion summarizes the conviction that both culture and Public Libraries are an open field for peaceful coexistence

### The Public Library we want

The old concept of a Library was a place for social distinction. In the Middle Ages, for example, it was a conservation space reserved for those who had knowledge and who were interpreters and speakers of religion. That concept was followed at the end of the 18th Century by the public library as a place in which citizens from blossoming cities had free access to books and documents. Since then, with conceptual adjustments as the notion of culture was reformulated, the public library became associated with two primary goals: to be a center for the preservation of bibliographic heritage and for students and researchers to consult books and documents.

Today, the public library has adapted from the evolutionary process of being a consulting and conservation center, but they are now also a focal point for reading all types of texts and audiovisual materials and an active gathering space for citizens and communities around culture, science, education, amusement and for the universal exchange of knowledge.

The two primary goals are precisely those of the ideal public library: an institution providing **basic and complementary services** covering the full diversity and cultural, ethnic and social characteristics of every municipality and department of Colombia. A library with **equipment and infrastructure** in accordance with minimum technical requirements defined as per the legal character of municipalities in which services are free. A library with **connectivity** in its agenda and with conditions for the exchange of services with the **National Network of Public Libraries** and with other networks of libraries in the country and abroad. More than just a duty, this public library is obligatory and should be guaranteed by territorial and national administrations. The Law of Public Libraries defines all **technical, financial and institutional instruments**, as well as all the necessary planning and coordination spaces to provide services.

### Scope of the Law of Public Libraries

The Law of Public Libraries lays the basis for **National Policy** of the National Network of Public Libraries. To do that, it traces technical guidelines on the operation of all State Public Libraries in the country, their infrastructure, basic services they should provide for free, and the profile of the personnel to fulfil them. The Law defines instruments for the sustainable development of public libraries with tax incentives for those supporting their operation, public resources, national and territorial coordination, institutional obligations, citizen's participation, management and performance measurement, etc..

The provisions of the Law do not cover other libraries or networks, such as the Bank of Republic Network of Libraries, the Family Benefit Funds Network of Libraries, community libraries and school and university libraries, even though all of them shall have a place in the National Technical Committee of Public Libraries, which will be explained later.

### Public use and social interest, social investment and public service

These three fundamental concepts of public libraries must be highlighted as they imply deep duties, faculties, rights or resources:

The **infrastructure, equipment and services** of libraries of the National Network of Public Libraries are for **public use and social interest**. Resources for the National Network of Public Libraries are considered a **social investment**, a matter that corresponds to the new concept of State in which public resources are not aimed at increasing the production of certain goods, but **to improve the general welfare and to satisfy people's needs**, especially in the social sectors with greatest needs.

Article 350 of Colombia's Constitution declares that investment cannot be reduced with regards to the total expenditure of the budget of the immediately previous year; therefore, public libraries should always have constant or increasing allocations from public budgets. Likewise, article 366 of the Constitution stipulates that in the budgets of the Nation and territorial entities **social public expenditures should have priority over any other allocation**; therefore, within national or territorial allocation of money for culture, libraries shall be preferred.

Finally, services provided by libraries from the National Network of Public Libraries are considered a *public service*. Any public service should be provided **continuously**, with a **universal character**. Public authorities (even the Police) should guarantee this provision, for example, acting immediately to prevent a citizen from being denied access to the public library, or from being charged for basic services, or preventing impact on the minimum number of hours libraries should be opened to the public.

### **Public Library Operation**

Public library services of the National Network of Public Libraries are fully regulated in favour of the user and its right to information, knowledge and culture, both in technical as well as in administrative aspects. Let's see to what extent:

- the opening hours may not be less than **40 hours per week**, including Saturdays, and if possible, Sundays and holidays.
- the services must be of good **quality** (with client satisfaction parameters that guide planning, action and evaluation processes); **appropriate** (adequate for what citizens require or request, not partial); **timely** (aligned with the citizens' request or to satisfy the need); **plural** and guaranteeing cultural and linguistic diversity (for example, public libraries' equipment should be in accordance with languages spoken in the municipality, which does not imply denying others).
- library infrastructure, understood as physical spaces and properties designed, built or adapted to carry out library activities and services, should follow technical guidelines established by the Ministry of Culture in coordination with the National Library. Public libraries that share space with other types of cultural institution should guarantee that its operation is not affected by these other activities.
- libraries must continuously improve, and should become active spaces reflecting the make up and diversity of each community.
- library personnel: provision of library services requires people initiating, advocating and promoting services, and both content and infrastructure development. Employees must be competent for the requirement of the jobs. The number of positions must correspond to the territorial entity involved (municipality or department) and training and professional development of staff must be ongoing.

### **Bibliographic heritage**

Bibliographic and documentary heritage is part of the much greater cultural heritage of Colombia. There are certain responsibilities at different levels:

#### **1. National level**

## **Ministry of Culture**

The Ministry of Culture, as coordinator of the National Network of Public Libraries, through the National Library of Colombia, has ruling functions and is in charge of stating policies, setting regulations, establishing services, managing tasks and dictating general guidelines.

The Ministry of Culture also has to coordinate with all stakeholder groups to ensure that public libraries are developed to the maximum benefit of all. For example, with the Ministry of National Education, universities and training institutions, in the development of a reading policy and a policy for the training of library personnel; with the advice of the Public Libraries National Technical Committee; in developing assessment methods with the Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications, for the implementation of technological means to advance in a concept of interactive public library.

## **Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications**

The Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications is responsible for ensuring that all libraries in the country have sufficient **equipment** and **connectivity**. Connectivity should be exploited through interaction, including dialogue with museums, libraries, documentation centers, music libraries, community radio and multiple information scenarios as part of an ambitious knowledge project.

## **National Planning Department (DNP)**

Besides participating, in accordance with its natural function in the assessment of the resources of the General Participation System and in the design of development plans, the National Planning Department (DNP) also includes tasks in the interest of consolidating the National Network of Public Libraries. The DNP is in charge of establishing the methodology to receive assessments made by the Ministry of Culture and to incorporate them as part of the management indicators of territorial entities

## **Public Libraries National Technical Committee**

This committee represents all sectors, trade unions and participants of the process of reading, books and public libraries, as well as other active libraries networks in the country. The Committee has been conceived as an organization advising the Government - Ministry of Culture - and articulation and coordination with public and private organizations or people who may contribute to the further development of the National Network of Public Libraries.

The Committee's technical vision should accompany the coordinated regulatory process defined by the Ministry for public libraries, and at the same time it should contribute to the design of cooperative mechanisms between the Network and other library networks.

## **National Government**

The National Government, through the above entities, has the mission of promoting bibliographic development and connectivity and basically, of fostering and guaranteeing cultural, human, individual and collective rights underlying any cultural entrepreneurship. Within the regulatory field, the Government maintains responsibility to develop library legislation, without preventing or deterring day to day implementation and accreditation and training of professional, technical technological staff.

## **2. Departmental level**

Without creating additional burdens or functions within the holistic approach of the National Network of Public Libraries, territorial entities, in particular departments, municipalities and districts, are responsible for working towards greater sustainability of investments or national policies and promoting the execution of library related policies and the guidelines developed by the Ministry of Culture.

Departments coordinate the operation of the Network within their jurisdiction including infrastructure, equipment, connectivity, labour stability and training of library personnel, basic services or accessory services in accordance with the possibilities. Finally, as is natural with the purpose of guaranteeing the characteristics typical from each region, the Departments are invited to promote bibliographic services for rural communities and develop collections relevant to the ethnic and cultural composition of the respective jurisdiction.

A core aspect when reviewing the specificity of the responsibility of territorial entities, is that public libraries of this level must comply with the provision of bibliographic services, infrastructure, equipment and provision of personnel in accordance with minimum requirements required by the Law and with technical guidelines (regulations) developed by the Ministry of Culture and/or the Government, within its coordinating mission of the National Network of Public Libraries.

Understanding the national reality, differences in development, difficulties in the assignment of resources or the complexity of everyday life, the task of consolidating the National Network of Public Libraries based on the vision for Colombia, makes it definitely ambitious.

Notwithstanding what has been generally covered above, there are also some specific areas within the Network which need to be taken into account in the distribution of competencies.

## **Departments**

Departments are in charge of managing the Legal Deposit in their jurisdiction through their Department Library, in coordination with the National Library. Likewise, they are in charge of coordination of the activities of the Network within their jurisdiction (for example, supporting municipal initiatives or promoting exchange between libraries of the municipalities or through resource intermediation functions such as IVA (VAT).

This coordination function should be fulfilled by a professional or a technician, which does not necessarily imply the creation of a position beyond the Department's financial or administrative possibilities but should assign the functions to a member of the existing personnel, with exclusive dedication.

Additionally, each Department may create a Departmental Committee of Public Libraries, as a consultative body for plans and policies for the development of the network within the departmental sphere. Should they be created, these Committees would have functions similar to those of the National Committee of Public Libraries and they would be guided by the same cost-free notion of their members.

Departmental Libraries are also in charge of providing bibliographic services under the minimum conditions and requirements already covered.

## **Municipalities and Districts**

The organization of the National Network of Public Libraries is based on the principle that municipalities act as the fundamental entity of the State's political-administrative division as essential providers of Public Services. Municipal and district mayors and councils are therefore obliged to maintain and equip their public libraries within a system of support determined by the Public Library Law and within policies in the National Reading and Libraries Plan (PNLB), in which additional resources, coordination, solidarity and support from the private sector may operate in an integral way.

The concept of the Network adopted in this new design ensures that bibliographic services are based on principles of coordination and complementarity. Therefore, if a municipality has an efficient and sustainable library belonging to another Network (such as the case of a mixed or private library belonging to the Family Benefit Fund), the municipality's public library may give priority to other towns, places or neighborhoods. It is also possible for municipalities to have more than one public library.

### **And... with what?**

Public policies require concrete implementation instruments, such as the resources necessary to carry them out. There are plenty of examples of these:

- a set of financing mechanisms have been defined for general culture, which results in fixed assignments of the State current resources. There is also a scheme of preferential treatment within the exchange, tax, customs and credit spheres. The idea was to balance support mechanisms amongst the publishing industry with robust promotion models from a holistic view of the book chain to include creation, production, publication, distribution and even acquisition of whose purpose is guaranteeing community access to reading and knowledge.

### **Examples include, IVA (VAT) on Mobile telephone systems**

Since 2007, the mobile telephone service has been taxed with 20% IVA (VAT), even though most services pay a rate of 16%. The additional 4% has to be distributed as follows: 75% for sports and the remaining 25% to be sent from the Ministry of Culture to the Capital District and to Departments for them – through an agreement with municipalities, and prior presentation of viable projects – to assign 50% to sports and 50% to the promotion of culture. At least 10% of the total increase of IVA (the four points of IVA) shall be assigned to the equipment, infrastructure and creation of public libraries, resources which may not be used to finance payroll or operational budget of the respective library.

Indeed, it is not common for mountains to come to Mohammed, therefore, the search for these types of contributions from the private sector implies a serious level of management from the administration of each public library, which implies putting together detailed plans to show the potential donor the chain of benefits it may obtain, not only from the tax point of view, but also from the social responsibility and advertising points of view.

**Incentive to the publishing industry:** within the reading field, there is a chain process starting with the production of content, particularly books and in its participation in international exchange, full exemption of income and complementary taxes. The temporary extension of this incentive was subject to the condition that the respective publisher satisfied Legal Deposit in the number of copies per each title published, not greater than ten (a higher number than the current one), whose purpose is to support the equipment of public libraries and which should be regulated by the Government.

**Other mechanisms:** the holistic concept of designing the National Network of Public Libraries implies there are other networks or libraries which may contribute to similar purposes. It was foreseen that as those non public libraries are integrated to support public access, in accordance with governmental regulations, they may also have access to the system of economic support granted by the government.

### **The network concept**

Throughout this document we have been referring to the **National Network of Public Libraries** as the articulation of public libraries in the national, departmental, district and municipal spheres. Its' equipment and heritage, bibliographic services, resources, infrastructure and personnel fulfil the mission of supporting the public, through users and communities.

This is articulated through a set of standards, bodies, processes and resources aimed to prevent duplication of efforts; it promotes the unity of criteria and goals through principles and rules for the interpretation and application aimed at the development and transformation from the contemporary concept of a public library. The network, as every institution, seeks constructive goals, which facilitate interaction and at the same time, limit competencies and attributions.

The vision of the Network is based on its background, the creation of the National Library of Colombia in 1777, the experience from the 70's for the mobilization of a network approach as contemporary visions, strategies and the experience of the National Reading and Libraries Plan, included in the National Development Plan "Towards a Community State 2001 - 2005", in the Development Plan 2005 - 2009 and in the National Culture Plan 2001 - 2010, in otherwords, everything within the perspective of defining the institutional framework to govern the action of public libraries we want in the country.

The assignment of commitments within the Network concept is concurrent with the territorial decentralized structure; the central level proposes policies and regulations to that purpose: the departmental level is in charge of coordinating interaction between the Nation and Municipalities and they in turn are in charge of executing the corresponding projects for the creation, strengthening and maintenance of the whole project.

The Law of Libraries states that the policy of the National Network of Public Libraries is to be integrated into economic and social development plans at all levels, with the following implications:

- the need to include within the National Development Plan, a Plan related to the promotion of the Network;
- considering the cascade planning structure, territorial entities, notwithstanding their autonomy, should consider, the creation of departmental, district and municipal plans, taking into account policies and strategies of the National Development Plan. For the inclusion into the development plans of the library related component, advice from the Public Libraries National Technical Committee will be available.
- territorial plans should be developed through corresponding action plans and are a matter of management and results of performance measurement on management, efficiency and effectiveness indicators. Being included, in the evaluation of the DNP is fully acceptable.

### **I do it ... I do not do it ... I do it...**

Library legislation determines that public administration at all levels will guarantee the participation of citizens in the formulation of policies, programs and projects of the library sector.

Social control is joined by the legal obligation, including the Attorney General's Office, General Controller's Office, Territorial Controller's Offices, the National Council of Culture, the National Council of Reading and Libraries, the National Cultural Heritage Council and Departmental and District Heritage Councils. The Public Libraries National Technical Committee may also be involved in the surveillance and be responsible for the follow up of this basic purpose.

There are many measures, almost all of them binding. More than the sanctions, however, the goal would be to achieve a country we dream of, a country of readers who will not only decipher signs, but who would also interpret them with constructive sense, motivating the fulfillment of what the new Law of Public Libraries imposes.

This is what citizens are expecting.

.