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## LIBRARY SERVICES FOR USERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS - THE STATE OF AFFAIRS IN THE CROATIAN CAPITAL AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

### **Summary**

Every person has the right to information and knowledge.

Individuals who are not able to use conventional library services depend on information professionals as well as on information technology. According to goals of IFLA's Section of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons, authors would like to promote free access to information in Croatia.

In order to start on the known basis, it has been decided that a research needs to be conducted with the aim of getting an exact picture of the state of affairs in the field of serving special needs users. It took place during the summer of 2000 in Zagreb and its surrounding area, which makes one quarter of the Croatian population. Hospitals, prisons, homes for the aged and associations for people with special needs were included in the research. Public and university libraries were also part of the research, but at a more superficial level. In the next phase in 2001 a more complex research will be conducted in order to examine them thoroughly.

In the article the results of the research are presented. The assumptions with which we started were confirmed. These are: 1) libraries and library services for people with special needs are present but not for all groups of special needs users; 2) there is an interest in improving the quality of library services through co-operation with external libraries, particularly the public ones and other specialised libraries; 3) there is a lack of technological and software support, especially for access to electronic information resources.

One of the most important reasons for the unsatisfactory state of affairs is absence of systematic legislative support. The existing legislative regulations are also presented because they are considered to be the major basis for systematic services implementation.

One of the conclusions of the last Croatian Library Association Assembly (held in September 2000) was to establish a working body within the Association, which would promote library services for people with special needs in Croatia. This would include establishment of effective co-operation with experts and various associations for people with special needs, regulation and standardisation of co-operative programmes of public libraries with hospitals, homes for the aged and prisons as well as programmes for people with mental problems. The working body would also organise courses for librarians for new adaptive technologies and special needs of the users.

## **Introduction**

Every person has the right to knowledge and information. There is no doubt that when libraries promote and make available more information and knowledge on a variety of topics, a more democratic society develops. A lot needs to be done on different areas such as censorship, making specific information available etc., in order to promote democracy and all the aspects of achieving it. This article deals with one particular aspect: the universal right to access, which is clearly defined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 19: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". Library users with special needs need to be taken care of in order to have equal access to library services. It is especially important to point to the great advantage of new technologies, which are becoming more and more sophisticated and at price accessible. IFLA Section for Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons "is concerned with library and information services to all those groups within the community who for whatever reason are unable to make use of conventional library services. These groups include people in hospitals and prisons, the elderly in nursing homes and care facilities, the house-bound, the deaf and the physically and developmentally disabled" (<http://www.ifla.org/VII/s9/slsdp.htm>). According to these categories, a research has been conducted in order to determine the state of affairs in Croatian libraries, on the basis of which a plan for future action has been drafted.

## **Description of the research: methodology, assumptions and results**

### **Legislative regulations**

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia regulates special protection of people with disabilities in the Chapter "Basic freedoms and rights of man and citizen". Special regulations devoted to people with disabilities is non-existent. But there is a tendency to solving such issues: in 1999 National Program for improving the quality of life of people with disabilities was brought by the Croatian Government. However, libraries' function is not at any point clearly defined. Their role is still not recognised at the level of legislative regulations.

Libraries for people with special needs are part of certain social institutions (homes for the elderly and a variety of associations and societies), educational and health institutions, jails and houses of correction. Due to that, the libraries are under the regulations of their institutions and laws dealing with the institutions.

The Law on Libraries (1) does not cite libraries serving disadvantaged persons as a special group of libraries or as belonging to any of the six defined library types (national, public, school, university, faculty, research and special).

## **Advantages of new technologies on the example of the blind and visually impaired**

The blind and visually impaired have in the past been limited mostly to few and outdated publications. This was due to the fact of slow and expensive Braille print and audio book process of publication. Today all digital information can easily be made accessible through the usage of a sophisticated speech synthesis software. For the Croatian language there are several speech synthesis programs, but at the moment all of them are experimental and often inefficient. Two years ago a new software was started to be developed at the Department of Phonetics, University of Zagreb. This particular one is part of a multinational project MBROLA (2), the idea of which is to make speech synthesis program available in public. What was developed two years ago was the Croatian diphone database which was then made available in the MBROLA project. The work on the software has been improving and when it is finished, all libraries will be able to implement it at their computers where the visually impaired and blind would come and do a variety of things: surf through the Internet, read a digital book or a magazine, read a paper book or a magazine using a scanner, write letters and documents, and enjoying the company of others. Today there is only one library for the blind in Croatia and its users are isolated from all other libraries.

## **Plans for the future**

At the last Croatian Library Association Assembly held in September 2000 a conclusion was brought to establish a working body which would promote goals of IFLA Section for Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons. What needs to be done in the near future includes the following:

- 1) do research on public libraries' services;
- 2) do research in other Croatian areas;
- 3) create a detailed database on the basis of the research in order to follow changes and development;
- 4) spread consciousness on the need to integrate services for people with special needs in public libraries (and not isolate them in specialised ones);
- 5) develop a model public library and implement services for the blind and visually impaired. It would also serve as a model to faculty and university libraries;
- 6) establish co-operation with experts (who are in charge of people in hospitals and prisons, the elderly in nursing homes and care facilities, the deaf and the physically and developmentally disabled);
- 7) establish co-operation with a variety of associations for people with special needs and disabilities. Many contacts have already been established during the research and several experts are willing to actively participate in the working body. These two things need to be done in order to get a thorough insight into their needs and insure mostly appropriate services;

- 8) standardise co-operation of public libraries with hospitals, homes for the elderly and jails. Programs of co-operation are sporadic and insufficient. Often all that needs to be done is regulate mobile libraries' services in terms of visiting these institutions too (at this moment they are restricted to residents in remote areas);
- 9) standardise libraries' programs for people with mental health problems
- 10) provide advice and help to libraries improving their services for people with special needs;
- 11) organise education of librarians for the new users and technologies intended for them;
- 12) deal with possibilities and advances of new technologies and electronic resources for people with special needs and disabilities, particularly in the library and museum community;
- 13) help in Croatian speech synthesis software development and sophistication;
- 14) co-operate and undertake common projects with Slovenia, other neighbouring countries and the international community in general;
- 15) promote W3C guidelines for creating the web space in Croatia in order to ensure greater accessibility of electronic resources to people with physical disabilities;
- 16) create a web site with all the information on the working body, current projects, advice, international links, etc. The web site would be part of the Croatian Library Association's site (<http://pubwww.srce.hr/hkd/>); and
- 17) particularly work on the legislative regulations at the national level.

## **References**

- 1) Zakon o knjiznicama
- 2) The MBROLA Project Homepage  
<http://tcts.fpms.ac.be/synthesis>