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The Right to Information: Is It Possible for Developing Countries?

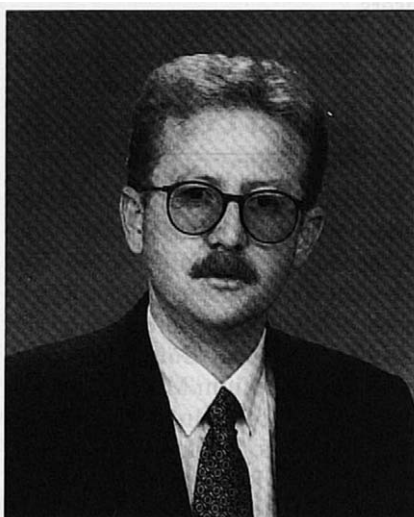
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Introduction

Information is power for development. For this reason, the right to information is an important human right. However, as many



other rights, there are pre-conditions related to economic, social, cultural and political development for realizing the right to information. While developed countries seem to have important opportunities for the right to information, the least developed and developing countries are far from realizing this right.

This study examines the opportunities for the right to information in least developed and developing countries and attempts to reach a conclusion about the impact of these issues on librarians' efforts.

Democracy, Intellectual Freedom and the Right to Information

First of all, we have to discuss the ethical aspects of the library profession connected with intellectual freedom and the right to information for understanding the primary reason for the existence of libraries. The concept of the right to information is based

on the concept of the freedom of information. Freedom of information means intellectual freedom. Both intellectual freedom and the right to information are human rights which protect human life and human development. However, human rights need to be protected by a full democracy in countries. In order to have full democracy, all members of society should be able to participate in the decision-making process and for this reason they need the right to information. Unless there is a true democracy in a country, the problem of the right to information cannot be fully solved.

We cannot say that there is full democracy in many developing countries despite their having become more democratic since 1980. The index of democracy by the World Bank (Diagram 1) indicates this situation clearly. According to this diagram, in the majority of developing countries, democracy is not working completely. It can be seen that only OECD (or developed) countries have established real democratic regimes. If we accept that a full democracy is a pre-condition for the right to information, it can also be said that developing countries do not yet have the chance to use fully the right to information.

Human Development and the Right to Information

"Human poverty constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights. To promote social progress and raise the standard of living within the wider concept of freedom, international human rights law recognizes economic and social rights with the aim of attacking poverty and its consequences. Among these rights are an adequate standard of living, food, housing, education, health, work, social security and a share in

DIAGRAM 1

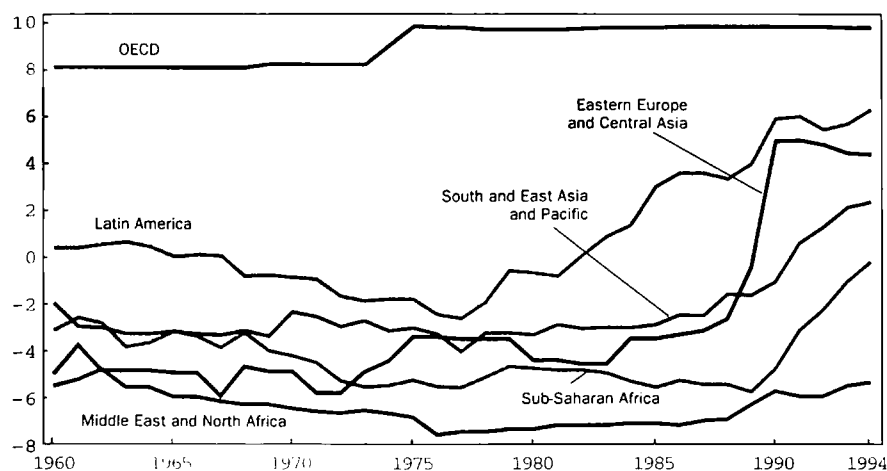


Diagram 1: Index of Democracy (most democratic = 10)

Source: World Bank, 1997

the benefits of social progress".¹ These rights are sine qua non for using the right to information at both national and individual level. A person who does not have enough food, shelter, health, work, education and security does not need to use the right to information.

(literate) people can use the right to information. Illiterates cannot use this right even if they need it. Srikantaiah and Dong⁵ point out that there is a definite correlation among the number of users of Internet and the GNP and the literacy rate. It can be said that there is also a strong correlation

The ratio of enrollment by level of education by regions is a good parameter for the aspect of the national level of the right to information. According to the combined first, second, and third level gross enrollment ratios in Table 2, 64% of the population of the least developed countries and 44% of the population of developing countries are not educated. This means that these countries cannot use the right to information and do not have it as a priority. Article 29 describes the aims of education. One has to conclude that the right to information, or the right to access to sources of information, is related to an educational aim, and should be put in the perspective of general education and human development".⁴

Another negative situation is the relation of expenditures on education with the percent of GNP. Though least developed countries spend 3.1% of their GNP on education, this ratio is 3.8% for developing countries and 5.8% for industrialized countries.⁵ Unless developing and least developed countries increase their expenditures on education as much as that of industrialized countries, it will be difficult to realize the right to information in these countries.

There is a meaningful difference in the literacy rate between least developed/developing countries and developed countries. While the

Convention	Countries that have ratified or acceded	Countries that have not ratified or acceded
Economic, social and cultural rights, 1966	135	57
Civil and political rights, 1966	136	56
Elimination of discrimination against women, 1979	153	39
Rights of the child, 1989	190	2

Table 1. Ratification Status of Major Human Rights Conventions, 1 March 1997

Source: United Nations, 1997

Table 1 shows that there are many countries which have not ratified or acceded to some major human rights conventions. It means that these countries face the problem of human rights, and consequently the right to information.

Two notions of human development can be discerned. One is on the level of the individual, and the other is on the national level.² Table 2 shows the regional aggregates of human development with some basic indicators and draws a profile of human development. Only educated

	Least Developed Countries	Developing Countries	Industrial Countries
Life expectancy (years)	50.4	61.8	74.1
Adult literacy rate (%)	48.1	69.7	98.5
Combined 1 st , 2 nd and 3 rd level gross enrolment ratio	36	56	83
Access to health services (%)	49	80	-
GNP per capita (US D)	210	1053	17221
Human development index	336	0.576	0.911

Table 2: Regional Aggregates of Human Development Indicators

Source: United Nations, 1997

between the use of information and the literacy rate, simply because the information user must be literate.

ratio of literacy is 98.5% for developed countries, it falls to 69.7% for developing countries and

50.4% for least developed countries. That means that half of the population of least developed countries and one-third of the population of developing countries cannot reach written information. And it also means that priority should be given to creating a literate society in the least developed and developing countries.

One of the basic rights of a person or nation is to live a healthy life. An ill person or a country which has serious health problems on the national level does not need the right to information as a priority. From the viewpoint of health there is a distinct difference between developing and developed countries. While the ratio of the population with no access to health services in least developed countries is 51%, it is 20% in developing countries and less than 5% in industrialized countries.⁶ These ratios show that least developed and developing countries still have serious health problems. It will not be realistic to expect that a country which has health problems to solve will give priority to the right to information.

100,000 population is 7 for developing countries and 52 for developed countries. Telephone lines per 100 population is 0.3 for least countries, 3.3 for developing countries and 40.1 for industrialized countries.⁷ As of 1994 no daily newspapers were published in the 37 least developed and developing countries and their territories.⁸ The right to communicate is a basis for the right to information. In this case, it is possible to say that the right to information is still far from the reach of the least developed and developing countries.

Population and the Right to Information

The world's population is 5,629,635,000 and of this total 68% are in developing countries, 10% are in the least developed countries and 21% are in developed countries.⁹ These ratios show that only 20% of the world's population generally has positive conditions for the right to information, and 80% have major problems which affect the solution to the problem of the right to information. For instance,

Libraries and the Right to Information

Libraries, especially public libraries as information and cultural centres, have important responsibilities in safeguarding the public's right to information. When we look at the distribution of public libraries in the world, it can be seen that there is an inequality and imbalance.

According to Table 4, the ratio of public library use is 0.2% in Uganda but 57.6% in the United Kingdom. While 1,145,611 persons use only one public library in Uganda, there is a public library for every 2,851 persons in Finland. According to the collections of public libraries, in the United Kingdom there are 2.29 books per person but only one book per 3,000 persons in Uganda.¹¹ It can clearly be seen that there is a strong relationship between the level of development and the use of public libraries. For the use of a library in a country there must be enough libraries and educational facilities. Development is the foundation which increases public library use and consequently the right to information.

Library services, and of course the right to information, can be thought of as a part of the national information policy. However, most of the least developed and developing countries generally do not have national information policies.¹² The lack of a national information policy in a country negatively affects library services and the right to information.

	Least Developed Countries	Developing Countries	Industrial Countries
Radios (per 1000)	96	178	1.018
Televisions (per 100)	2	14	50
Book titles published (per 100000)	-	7	52
Main telephone lines (per 100)	0.3	3.3	40.1
International telephone calls (Minutes per person)	0.5	2.5	35.1
Fax machines (per 100)	-	0.1	2.8
Internet users (per 10000)	-	1.5	223.2
Personal computers (per 100)	-	-	14.2

Table 3: Communications Profile
Source: United Nations, 1997

When we look at the communications profile of the developing countries and developed countries (Table 3), it can be seen that the least developed and developing countries won't have the traditional media in the years to 2000. More than 80% of the population does not have television. Book titles published yearly per

while the number of deaths at ages 1-4 per 100,000 is 3,128 in South Africa, it is 30 in Finland.¹⁰ The fundamental right for the least developed and developing countries seems to be the right to live. In addition, over-population creates many extra problems for a country and the largest part of the world's population live in developing countries.

Conclusion

As Marian Koren said, human development can be described as a comprehensive economical, social, cultural and political process which aims at constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals.¹³ The right to information as a human right is a result and/or product of human development. The phrase "the right to

information" for a person who is hungry, who does not have enough money to live, who is not educated, and who does not have freedom, does not have any meaning. In the same way, a country which has problems of hunger, education, economic and political freedom cannot give priority to the right to

right to live and then the right to information".

We cannot realize the right to information unless we realize the other rights mentioned above. Although, as librarians there are many things we can do, as long as the inequality continues between developing and developed

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- ³ Srikanthiah, K., and X. Dong. Internet and its Impact on Developing Countries: Examples from China and India. Paper delivered during the 63rd IFLA Council and General Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark, 31 August-5 September 1997.
- ⁴ Koren, op. cit.
- ⁵ United Nations, op. cit.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ UNESCO *Statistical Yearbook 1996*. Paris: UNESCO, 1997.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ World Health Organization. *World Health Statistics Annual 1995*. Geneva: WHO, 1996.
- ¹¹ UNESCO *Statistical Yearbook*, op. cit.
- ¹² *National and International Information Policies*. Schipper, Wendy and Ann Marie Cunningham (eds). Philadelphia: National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services, 1991.
- ¹³ Koren, Ibid.

Countries	Population/public library numbers	Public lib. users/ population	Collection (Number of volumes:100)
Uganda	1.145.611	0.2	82
Canada	6.581	16.0	60955
Finland	2.851	47.3	36300
United Kingdom	10.854	57.6	133134

Table 4: Ratios of Public Libraries and Users

Source: Unesco Statistical Yearbook 1996

information. Of course, information is a power which plays an important role in solving these problems but governments and individuals generally are not aware of this power, and say: "first comes the right to eat, the right to work, the right to have shelter, the right to have social security, in short the

countries, it will not be realistic to expect to solve the problem of the right to information only by ourselves.

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