Library Services to disadvantaged peoples[1]

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Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you for the invitation to take part on a discussion with you. I am very honoured that you have invited Denmark as a special guest on this occasion.

I work for the Danish Library Agency[2], an advisory board to the Danish Ministry of Culture. Our job is on the one hand to advise the Ministry on library matters and on the other to support and actively promote the development of Danish libraries. In this connection I have decided to concentrate on the public libraries and their social library work. Perhaps – and hopefully – some of it might provide you with a measure of inspiration.

In Denmark we don't actually use the concept 'social library work'. For years we have talked in terms of 'outreach library work'. This meant functions actually outside the library building, aimed at the service to all who were prevented from visiting the library themselves, for example library service to hospitals, old people's homes, prisons, military barracks and 'The library at your doorstep, i.e. service to the old and the handicapped in their own homes. To deal with this aspect we had a special professional group under the Danish Union of Librarians who by tradition has always been a highly professional union.

The group, however, abolished itself six years ago when it began having difficulty in attracting members, amongst other things because there were no longer as many people within the library field who worked exclusively with this particular area. I was asked to speak on that occasion in the past and recently took another look at what I had then said: I said that our social work should continue to be an important part of library work, but that it was bound to find a new form and that it would to a greater extent become an integrated part of the libraries' other tasks. New ways had to be tried out and programmes had to be designed to match the needs of different groups. What we at that time could see the contours of was for example:

- A new generation of older people with a need for instruction in IT competencies.
- The need for support for reading stimulation. The Danish situation is that every pupil in four leaving elementary school is not able to read well enough to complete a further education – including a vocational education. In terms of young people with two languages, the figure is one in two.
- A particular challenge lies within the area of refugees and immigrants where the library could play an active role in the integration initiatives.

Traditional 'outreach work' is still operating, and many libraries make an important contribution in this way, but a lot of effort has also gone into the development of new forms of socially directed library work. To a great extent encouraged by government means for

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development, which we in the Danish Library Agency administrate. Over the past few years we have singled out special action lines and developed programmes for those areas which we find important to strengthen.

In 2006 we furthermore prepared an overall strategy for developments in our libraries. A strategy which we considered necessary for the library in order to live up to its position as a central public institution in a digital age. The strategy seeks to take into account new user habits and the new demands which globalisation imposes on Denmark's competitive abilities in an international context. At the present time government and the *Folketing* (the Danish parliament) prioritise:

- Research and Education
- Lifelong learning
- Innovation
- Social enterprises that activate and integrate

Within all these areas we feel that the library has some very important tasks to attend to.

I would like to give you some examples of current projects and programmes with a social aim:

A very concrete area is support for citizens with reading handicaps. The central institution for library service to the blind, The Danish National Library for the Blind[3], is in the process of reorganising its entire production from analogous to digital technology. Via the portal "E17" digital texts and audio books are introduced to the blind and others who because of some handicap are unable to read conventional text. Due to a comparatively liberal Danish copyright legislation on this point, dyslexics also have access to the site. The Danish National Library for the Blind mediates the digital texts directly to the user and cooperates with the public libraries which can provide guidance to the users in how to use the site. Several public libraries also run projects on IT utility programmes, which give the reading handicapped direct access to information that is being read aloud on the net. A completely new project deals with the integration of such IT utility programmes more generally in learning programmes aimed at lifelong learning.

One of the recommendations in our strategy is: The librarian must leave the library – and go in search of the user. This can happen in a physical sense or via the net. A small library in the south of Jutland has for example set up library service in a trucker centre in the municipality. Lorry drivers from all over the country, travelling all over Europe, gather together there. They can borrow audio books which they can enjoy listening to on the long journeys. The project has been a major success with completely new experiences for a group who traditionally has not enjoyed a comprehensive education, and who are not the keenest 'culture users'. A subsequent project is at the moment extending the service to cover the whole country.

Over the past ten years many public libraries in Denmark have supplied introduction and instruction to various target groups in the application of new technology and information search on the Internet. For example, courses for students in further education, courses for seniors and for immigrants. In connection with the structural reform which took effect at the turn of the year, *one* common digital access to public service was opened: borger.dk (citizen.dk) which is a cooperation between state, municipalities and regions. As a consequence of the libraries' obligation to mediate public information and in continuation of the work the libraries are already carrying out in instructing citizens in searching on the net,

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[3] www.dbb.dk/English/default.asp

an agreement on cooperation has been made with the national institution, the Digital Taskforce that further develops the service. The agreement means that the libraries are given an official role as ambassadors and tutors of borger.dk and the self-service solutions associated with it. Acquiring a digital signature, for example, is not entirely simple. The Danish Library Agency organises the cooperation and also finances an appropriate competence development programme for the libraries. All municipalities have joined the programme. The entire enterprise is, of course, meant as a service to all citizens, but in the nature of the case it does have a social dimension, seeing that some sections of the population will need more help than others.

Under the slogan 'The library – gateway to the Danish society' and in cooperation with the State and University Library, the Danish Library Agency has been running a three-year programme with a view to strengthening the libraries' work with integration of citizens with another ethnic background. The programme received government grants for four regional consultants who were to inspire and coordinate the individual libraries' work. At the same time the libraries were given the opportunity to apply for financial means for development projects. The Danish Library Agency wanted in this way to offer 'a helping hand' for the purpose of working out new models for the libraries' integration efforts, and thereafter the libraries themselves were to finance further developments. The results were so excellent that the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs wanted the libraries to develop the programmes even further with new activities. The kind of integration work that took place in the libraries had proved to work really well. A club for young girls in a part of Odense that has a heavy concentration of foreigners became an enormous success. To young girls and women belonging to an ethnic minority the library is one of very few places that they may visit freely. Via club activities the girls have learnt about social and health-related subjects, got help in seeking jobs etc.

The Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs and the Ministry of Culture have therefore subsequently made an agreement of cooperation, which will underpin the libraries' function as hothouses for citizenship and as learning centres and cultural meeting places. The first concrete result of the agreement is a grant of two million DKK towards establishing help with homework in the country's libraries. The aim is to help more young people who have to cope with two languages to improve their Danish, so that they may complete an out-of- school education and later a qualifying education. At the same time help with homework encourages a kind of social fellow-feeling that gives an insight into Danish values.

I feel that the examples I have talked about here apply to some of the libraries' offers with a clear social dimension. Having said that, the library is by nature, with its fundamental emphasis on ensuring free and equal access to information, socially inclusive. We positively know that the library has played a decisive role for many 'pattern breakers' both among Danes and immigrants.