Towards an assessment of public library value: statistics on the policy makers' agenda

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Abstract: Data and evidence on library value is a powerful tool for changing attitudes and actions towards libraries as well as can serve as a tool for advocacy and fundraising. Since all public libraries in Latvia receive government funding, librarians must advocate for support to provide and sustain services to their changing communities by demonstrating the value of libraries within their communities to their government bodies, funders and decision makers. This paper presents methodology, early findings, possible applications of results and lessons learnt from the research study "Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction" that has been conducted within the public library development project "Third Father's Son" in Latvia.

Keywords: Public libraries, Impact assessment, Value, Trust, Satisfaction, Information Ecology, Information Needs

1. Introduction
Research on trust and value of public libraries has never been done before in Latvia. The research study "Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction" has been conducted in Latvia as the part of the impact assessment plan within the public library development project "Third Father's Son". The project is co-financed by the government of Latvia and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation within the Global Libraries program. All local government authorities with their 874 public libraries are participating in the project the main goal of which is to improve people's quality of life by strengthening and using the capacities of public libraries to facilitate better and proactive use of resources offered by free access to IT and the Internet.

It is expected that the project "Third Father's Son" will raise the prestige and image of public libraries in society in general and value of public libraries in local communities. The project is beneficial to many people in Latvia, especially the rural population, in self-education, boosting the effectiveness of their working lives, developing social communication and getting better access to variety of services. The project also aims to motivate existing and to attract new library users that could benefit socially and economically from the new technologies and free Internet access in public libraries.

Since all public libraries receive government funding, librarians must advocate for support to provide and sustain services to their changing communities. Data and evidence on library value is a powerful tool for changing attitudes and actions towards libraries. Results from the study will help librarians in their advocacy efforts to demonstrate the value of libraries within their communities to their government bodies, funders and decision makers.

2. Context of the study
An "impact assessment" concept and measurement of social and economic impact of library services on local community and individual library user was novelty in Latvia at the beginning of the project implementation in 2006. An

application of developed impact assessment model in Latvia was the first step in measuring the value of IT related public library services and have led to substantial improvement of national statistics in the library field. An implementation of impact assessment plan has started with the baseline study in 2007 and will continue in longitudinal study till 2010 that will result in the final report on main social and economic benefits and impacts of library services and activities. After impact assessment that will be done by the project implementation organization all the meaningful and important indicators will be incorporated into national statistics and data will be collected on the annual basis. Besides main impact assessment studies several in-depth studies are planned that will supplement main studies with more specific in-depth data and evidence (Figure 1).
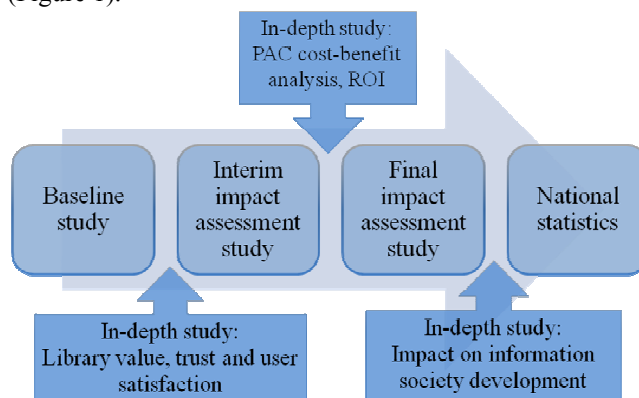

Figure 1: Impact assessment plan

After public procurement by project implementation organization the State Agency "Culture Information Systems" the research study "Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction" has been carried out by the Advanced Social and Political Research Institute as the separate in-depth study that supplements other studies planned within impact assessment plan (Figure 1).

3. Approach to the study

The theory and practice shows that various terms – impact assessment, outcomes measurement, value assessment, social and economic benefits, and social impacts a.o. – have been used by writers and researchers to explore the question of how important are libraries in the lives of library users or what is the role of library in community empowerment or personal development of community members (Wavell, at al, 2002). The recent research on the value of public library within a community can be broadly grouped into studies of economic impact and studies of social impact. Economic effects of public library services can be assessed by using different methods that can include economic impact analysis, cost benefit analysis, measurement of return on investment or time allocation method (Berryman, 2005). The study "Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction" is not looking forward direct economic impacts but if focusing more on direct and in-direct social outcomes created by public libraries within communities. The study is looking on the magnitude of social value that library can have by using context oriented research approach (Durrance, 2002) that includes research of information ecology of local community as the system to find out what is the role of library and librarian within it. From the economical point of view value has always been seen within a context of wealth, prosperity and well-being and uses the money as

unit of measurement. With regards to information and information services provided by library we speak about the value of use (Fenner, 2002). The theoretical background of the study is based on the theory of use-oriented value of information and information services (Saracevic and Kantor, 1997).

To look on the value of library service and trust issues at the level of local community an information ecology approach (Davenport and Prusak, 1997) has been used that includes looking on information technology, information strategy, policy, information environment and user behaviour as unified system. Information ecology is "a system of people, practices, values and technologies in a particular local environment" (Nardi and O'Day, 1999). The qualitative data collection tool that involves mapping of information ecology allows illustrating the networks of trust that exist in a geographic community. To research information ecology of local communities the ecological theory of human information behaviour (Williamson, 2005) has been used that contains model of information search and use ecology that helps to identify information sources available at the community as well as helps to understand user information needs, information search habits as well as factors that influence the local information ecology. In order to look on social and cultural factors that influence information processes the model of everyday life information seeking has been used (Savolainen, 2005).

4. Study design

Main goal of the research study is to get answers to:

- What is the value of public library in society in general and at the level of local community?
- What is the trust level in public libraries, librarians and information received through library?
- What is the satisfaction with public library services?

Several research questions were defined to meet the goal:

- How do inhabitants rank public library service against other services provided by local government/municipality? How important is the public library service for inhabitants compared with other services provided by local government/municipality?
- What is the peoples' level of trust in public libraries in comparison with other social and cultural institutions and other institutions in local government/municipality?
- What is people's level of trust in public librarians in comparison with other professions?
- What is the trust level in information received in/through public library (or by using e-services and content, provided by public library) in comparison with information received through other information channels and resources?
- What is the level of user satisfaction with public library services?

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used for the data collection purposes that includes:

- Representative survey of inhabitants of Latvia based on stratified random sampling that uses administrative, territorial and national stratification features. Representative sample of the general population (n=1016) includes library users as well as library non-users (inhabitants who haven't been in library and haven't used any library service within last year or more). The survey was conducted through personal (face-to-face) interviews at the places of residence

of respondents.

- Focused discussion groups (FDG n=10) in all regions of country. In order to find out regional differences in every region of Latvia two FDGs were organized covering both urban as well as rural areas. At the time of the study Latvia is facing the reform of administrative territories. In order to track experience of different settlements with different environment and availability of services, cities or towns where chosen from several levels that include city of state importance, city of amalgamated municipality that before the reform was the centre of district, city of amalgamated municipality that before the reform was the centre of local importance, city that will join some amalgamated municipality after reform but will not be a centre of it, and city/town as separate unit that will not join any new amalgamated municipality after reform, but will stay as separate unit with their rural territory. Mixed FDGs with 10-12 participants were organized considering socio-demographic structure of particular community at the same time covering library users as well non-users. Information ecology mapping tool has been applied during FDGs.

Quantitative study based on the ecological theory of human information behaviour (Williamson, 2005) and theory of use-oriented value of information and information services (Saracevic and Kantor, 1997) is looking for answers to which are the mostly used information sources of Latvia inhabitants, which sources they trust more, which services provided by their local governments they use and how are they satisfied with received services (this includes also library service with other provided services), how often they use particular services including library service, what is the value of public library to meet their information needs and other. An extensive questionnaire was built for the purposes of data collection that includes three main parts: 1) questions about information needs, sources and credibility of received information and used information sources, 2) questions about the frequency of usage of services provided by local governments, assessment of the quality of received services including library service, and 3) questions to find out user satisfaction with actual public library services.

Qualitative study based on the ecological theory of human information behaviour (Williamson, 2005) and the model of everyday life information seeking (Savolainen, 2005) is looking to find answers to:

- Which are most trusted information sources in the community?
- What information flows exist in the community?
- What is the role of the library in the information ecology of the community?
- What is the level of trust in library as information source?
- What is the role of librarians in the process of meeting user information needs in the community?

Summarizing results from all FDGs and generalizing developed information ecology maps researchers can identify most reliable information sources and detect patterns in terms of trusted sources of information in the communities as well as to describe information ecology around the public library.

4. Findings

To describe findings of the study author will refer mainly to the quantitative study since the qualitative data is not yet summarized, generalized and reported to the project implementation team. The study is going to result in synthesized

final report by June 2009.

Information needs and sources
To identify areas which inhabitants feel the greatest need for information respondents were asked to indicate topics on which they have searched for information during the last month prior to the survey (Figure 2). Received data shows that the greatest need was for information that relates to employment issues (more than a half of population (53 %) have performed information search in this area). Almost the same interest is being observed in the area of health (52 %). Other information needs include issues on transport (43 %), rights and responsibilities of citizens (41 %), shopping (40 %) and politics (39 %). Less interest was in areas like sport (20 %) and education (28 %) that can be explained with the fact that survey didn't include school children in the sample.
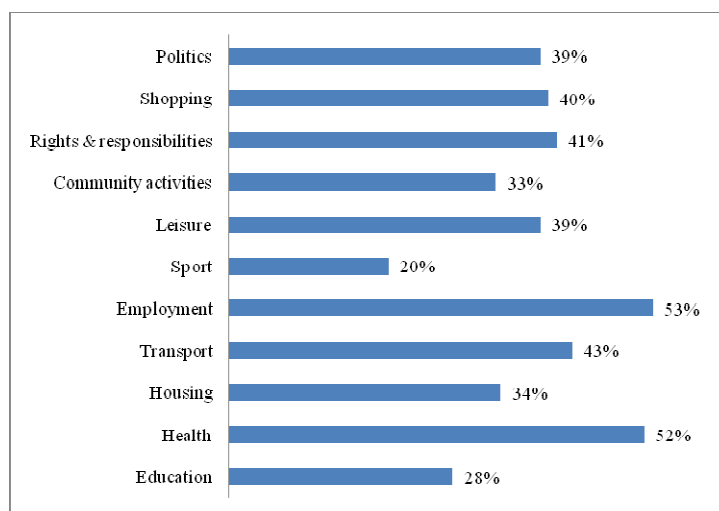

Figure 2: Most frequent information searches

To determine mostly used information sources respondents were asked to indicate information sources they use to fulfill their information needs. The study accordingly to the ecological model of information search and use (Williamson, 2005) divides information sources into three categories including personal networks, media and institutional sources. As expected the mostly used information sources are personal networks of respondents including relatives (63 %), friends (69 %) and colleagues and fellow-students (45 %). It has to be mentioned that the percentage of those who didn't received needed information using personal networks is very low, respectively relatives (3 %), friends (5 %) and colleagues and fellow-students (5 %). Media is also quite heavily used to find necessary information and this includes search in newspapers (54 %), Internet (56 %), television (51 %) and radio (34 %). But if compare to those who have received needed information through personal networks satisfaction of those who use media for their information needs is lower since the greatest part or respondents say they have got information they needed only partly, respectively from newspapers (61 %), from Internet (49 %), from television (62 %), and from radio (59 %). With respect to institutional sources (Figure 3) the study shows quite high level of information requests to health care institutions (35 %). Other institutions more often

addressed are municipality (24 %) and various reference services (23 %). Public library as an information source has the same importance for public as educational institution or private organizations that provide different kind of consultations (all the mentioned 16 %). The data received allows us to make a conclusion that people with more specific information inquiries like medical issues more often refer to particular institution that can provide knowledgeable and reliable information but on issues like employment (an area of the greatest information need) people first refer to their personal networks or media sources.
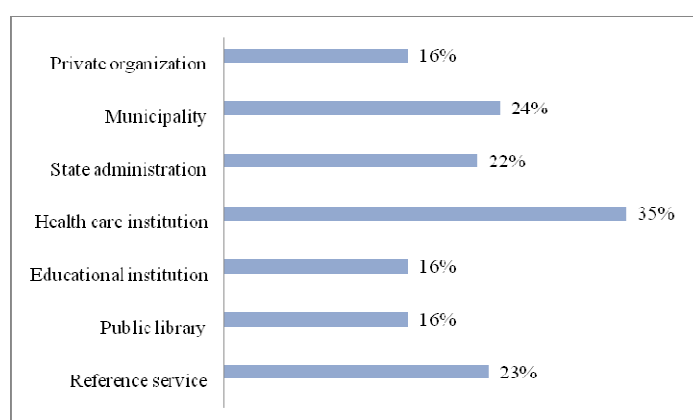

Figure 3: Information searches by using institutional sources

The lowest percentage of those who didn't receive needed information by using institutional sources is between those who use educational institution (3 %) or public library (4 %) for their information searches. The highest level of non-satisfied information needs comes from state administration (12 %) and private organizations (13 %).

To identify the level of trust in information received from various information sources, respondents were asked to indicate whether they have to verify received information (Figure 4).
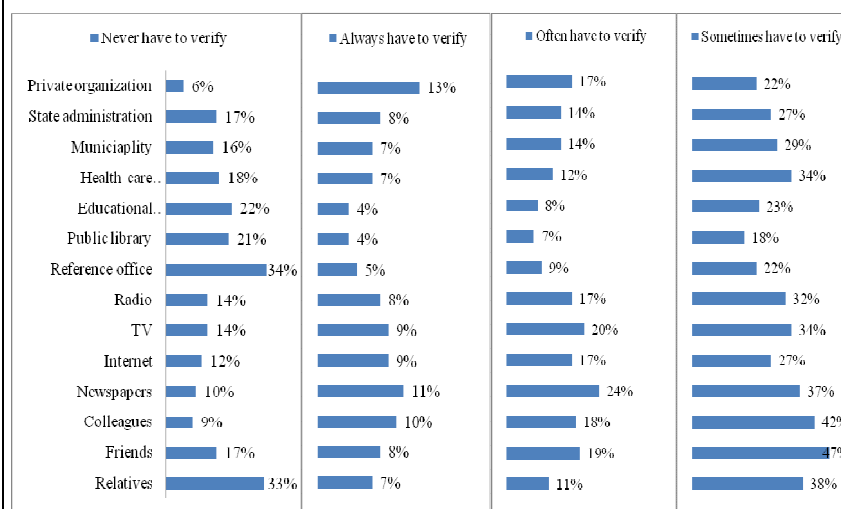

Figure 4: Trust in information received from information sources

Almost the same level of trust is observed in personal networks (33 % of respondents say they never have to verify information received from relatives) and in institutional sources (more than a third part of respondents (34 %) don't have verify information received from reference service). Within a context of all information sources public library shows high level of trust in terms of received information. With respect to institutional sources public library share the same level of trust with educational institutions. If speak to information that have to be verified by users, public library demonstrates the lowest percentage (4 % of respondents say they have to verify information received in library always, 7 % often, and 18 % sometimes).

Usage and satisfaction with municipality services and staff
To identify the value and role of public library service at the community level respondents were asked to show their activity in terms of usage of all available services provided by their local government/municipality. The mostly used services by population include public transportation services (77 % with 63 % of satisfied users), health care services (71 % with 51 % of satisfied users) and environmental services (71 % with 72 % of satisfied users). Cultural and recreational services that include visits of museums and libraries available in the area are used by more than a half of population (57 % with 63% of satisfied users). The less used services include sports services (28 % with 42 % of satisfied users and housing services (9 % with 21 % of satisfied users).

With respect to cultural and recreational services public library demonstrates the highest percentage of non-users (60 %) in communities (Figure 5). We find the same data in the baseline study that was conducted for purposes of overall impact assessment that shows 60 % those who haven't been to public library for a long time or haven't used any service provided by public library. Despite of the usage respondents demonstrate quite high support for library in terms of funding. All respondents were asked to indicate whether they would like to increase or reduce funding for cultural and recreational institutions in their local government that shows public library as the second institution to increase the funding and the last to reduce. It has also to be mentioned that public library demonstrates more frequent usage if compare to other cultural and recreational institutions used.
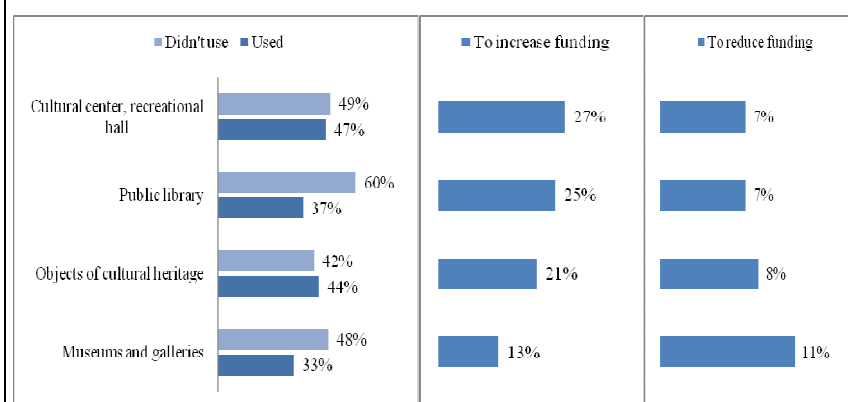

Figure 5: Usage and support of cultural and recreational services

Respondents were also asked to evaluate the quality of work of staff of different institutions in their local government (Figure 6) by indicating whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the quality of their performance. In that

context librarians are one of the most valued professionals in society with 56 % of those who are satisfied with their performance that is the same as for doctors (56 %) and comes right after teachers (58 %) that shows the highest evaluation. Also speaking about dissatisfied population librarians have the lowest percentage (3 %). It also has to be mentioned that evaluation of staff performance quality was not an easy task for respondents since high percentage of respondents say that it is hard for them to evaluate almost in all cases (Figure 6).
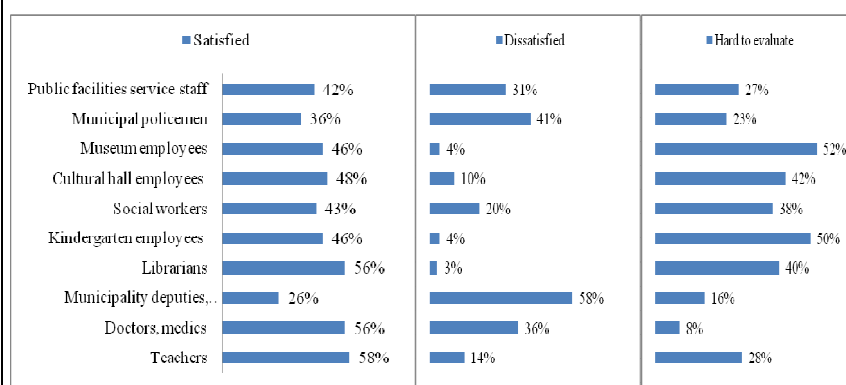

Figure 6: Evaluation of quality of staff performance

Usage and satisfaction with public library services
One of the goals of the study was to explore user satisfaction with public library services. The survey target group to research this was only those respondents who have used public library services during the last year prior to the survey.
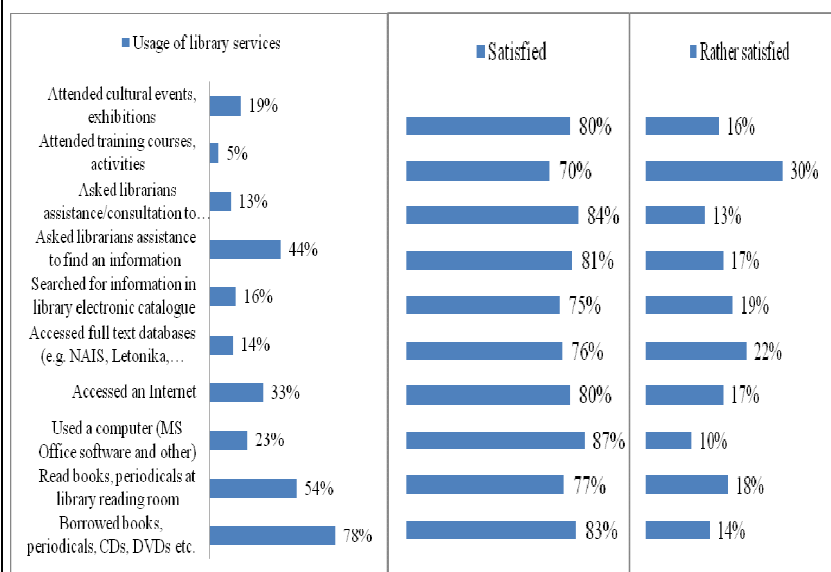

Figure 7: Usage and satisfaction with public library services

The study shows that the most popular library services (the same data in the baseline study) are an issuance of books and other stock items (78 %) as well as usage of library reading room (54 %). Respondents also indicated that items

borrowed from the library are used not only by themselves but also by their relatives (in 48 % of cases) and by their friends (in 7 % of cases). Almost half of library users value librarians assistance to find an information (44 %). Less activity by library users is observed in attending training courses (5 %) but this can be explained with the fact that organized training courses are provided only by bigger libraries that have their own training clases. Moren than 70 % of libraries in Latvia are one-person libraries that perform more individual consultation and not organized trainings in groups. The study also shows very high percentage of satisfactions with available services; almost in all cases satisfaction is above 95 %.

The value of public library services that users experience is not limited only to the social benefits (Figure 8). The greatest effect is seen in improvement of leisure hour in terms of reading (67 %) or information (47 %) and almost likewise in an area of education (62 % in terms of information for studies or helping children at school (54 %)). For more than a half of users (52 %) public library have helped to deal with health issues. An economic effect of public libraries on users is observed less than social however 28 % of respondets say that public library have helped them to save or to earn money or to find a job (19%) that has also an economic aspects.
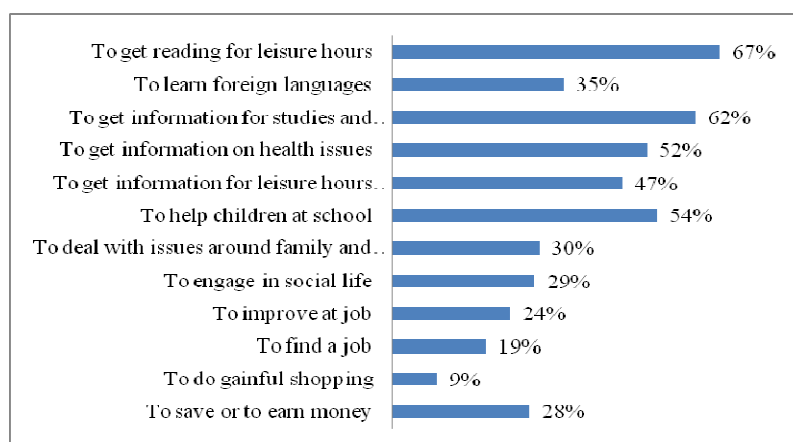

Figure 8: Experienced benefits from usage of public library

Conclusions

Measuring the value of public library is an ambitious field for researchers. Different methodological orientations and various research designs and techniques have been used by researchers over the world to demonstrate the value of public libraries (Berryman, 2005). To tell the story as complete as possible quantitative and qualitative methods have to be used and the study "Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction" involves both to measure use-oriented value of public libraries. Mostly all studies done in Latvia before look on the value of services from inside the library. An information ecology approach foster researchers to look at the value of services from outside the library by looking on the information ecology that exists in the community around the library and allows identifying the role of public library within a context of other information sources used by the public.

The study gives a good picture of user information needs and sources they use to fulfill them. It is evident that personal networks play an important role for users to meet their information needs however institutional sources are of the

same importance where public library has also high rates.

Within a context of other cultural and recreational services available for public at the communities public library is one of the most frequently visited institutions. Despite of that 60 % of respondents are not using public library service they demonstrate high support for public libraries in terms of funding (25 % would like to increase funding and only 7 % would be able to reduce the funding for public libraries that is the lowest percentage if compare to support for decreasing of funding for other cultural and recreational institutions). In terms of staff performance quality in the local government librarians are one of the mostly valued professionals in the communities (56 %) and have the same high evaluation as doctors (56 %).

The mostly used library service still is an issuance of books and other library items (78 %) and the value of this service can even be doubled since in 48 % items borrowed from the library are used also by other family members and in 7 % of cases by friends of library users. Almost half of population (44 %) value and use librarians' assistance to find information by using library resources. The greatest effect of public library is seen in improvement of leisure hours in terms of reading (67 %) or information (47 %) and almost likewise in an area of education. In smaller percentage if compare to social benefits study shows also some economic effects of public library as saving or earning of money (28 %) and other described.

The data and evidence from the study will be distributed within a community of librarians in Latvia and have to be used not only for advocacy purposes to speak with the responsible funding and policy authorities but also have to serve as the background for development and change of library performance strategies where applicable.

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