Poverty, democracy and public libraries

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Abstract
A central feature of public librarianship in the United States is that librarians have worked to develop a climate of openness by defining library policies to create an institution where all are welcome. In 1990 the American Library Association adopted the policy, "Library Services for the Poor," in which it is stated, "It is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies." (ALA Handbook of Organization, 1999-2000, policy 61). This policy was adopted because there had been a shifting level of emphasis in the interpretation of "openness" since the establishment of the public library. Open doors are very different from proactive service. In this chapter the socio-economic context of poverty is explored to gain an understanding of the role librarians can play today to provide opportunity for poor people to participate in democracy. A brief review of key writing and documents that define public library service is provided to establish the historical foundation.

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Libraries within the Western democratic tradition often refer to their place in maintaining and promoting the public sphere of discussion and free exchange of ideas. Although this is an imperfect ideal, it has a longstanding place in democracies (Byrne, 1999). The project, "Building Civil Society Capacity for Poverty Reduction" is a collaborative project of Huron University College, Canada and the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This project was developed by faculty members and librarians at both institutions and is designed to strengthen...