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## Crisis and planning in five European national libraries

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## **Crisis and planning in five European national libraries**

**Abstract:** This study aimed firstly to provide a rough estimate of the effects of the economic crisis on five European national libraries (Austria, Denmark, Malta, Portugal and Spain). Secondly it sought to establish the possible benefits for these libraries of having a strategic plan during that period. The approach consisted in an online survey targeting the directors of European national libraries with membership in the Conference of European National Librarians. The method was a questionnaire contained 14 structured questions under four major headings designed to gather information on the impact of the crisis, libraries' response and the measures adopted. It also included queries on attitudes towards planning and in particular whether the process was participatory. The findings revealed that the crisis affected libraries with differing intensity. The impact was closely related to the degree to which the respective countries were affected. Having a strategic plan in that period benefitted libraries in a number of ways, but essentially it enabled them to define priorities in a changing scenario. Although many papers have been published on the impact of the crisis on both public and university libraries, none has yet addressed national libraries. While limited to a small sample, the study constitutes an initial approach to the effects of the crisis on European national libraries and reveals inter-country similarities and differences. The study covered only a small sample of national libraries, in the awareness that the situation may differ in others.

**Keywords:** Economic crisis, public sector, strategic planning, European national libraries, transparency.

### **1. Introduction**

According to the European Union, the economic crisis affected the continent for the 10 years running from 2007 to 2017. Its onset and duration are deemed to differ from country to country, however, essentially as respects recovery, for the values prevailing prior to its advent (especially as regards unemployment) have yet to be restored in some cases. What was initially a financial crisis, compounded by the Lehman Brothers collapse in 2008, induced a banking and debt crisis that ultimately impacted the euro zone's real economy.

Although the crisis battered all European countries, the extent of the damage varied greatly depending on factors such as GDP per capita. The disparity in cultural spending in Europe in those 10 years is closely correlated to differences in that indicator

(Fundación Catalunya Europa, 2016). Recio and Banyuls (2011) defined three groups of countries in terms of GDP per capita. In the first, including Austria, Germany and Sweden, a deep recession was followed by a more or less vigorous recovery driven by the German powerhouse. In the second, countries afflicted by severe recession such as France, Hungary, Italy and United Kingdom recovered moderately beginning in 2010. The countries in the third group, Ireland, Greece and Spain, were deeply affected by a prolonged recession. Other indicators have served as grounds for establishing similar groups based on the responses to the crisis, such as their impact on the welfare state (García and Sotomayor, 2016).

The economic crisis, which was poorly handled in Spain and many other countries, led to heavy public indebtedness. That translated into measures to control spending and austerity policies, one of the consequences of which was a scale-back in welfare state benefits (Castells, 2014). Such post-crisis policies stoked discontent in the midst of weak economic recovery.

Despite its adverse impact, the crisis has also been optimistically interpreted as an opportunity for structural change in the cultural sector in terms of both policy and organisation, with suggestions for governance and management overhaul (Bonet and Donato, 2011). Another of the lessons learnt from the crisis was that formulating a strategic plan affords an organisation a medium- and long-term decision-making perspective (Wilson and Eilertsen, 2010).

Austerity measures imposed by budget cutting were applied to all public institutions, including all manner of libraries. Their plans were indisputably affected and their strategies and priority actions thwarted or modified as a result. More dramatically, these institutions had to rein in their payrolls by resorting to redundancies or failing to fill vacancies due to attrition. The outcome was zero staff growth in some libraries in the most severely affected countries (Fuentes Romero, 2012).

Libraries that at the time had a strategic plan may have been able to better reallocate their resources in such adverse circumstances and decide which tasks and services

should be maintained and which outsourced (where economically expedient). Against that backdrop, categorical opinions such as 'strategy is indispensable' (Ramió, 2010, p. 18) have been defended arguing that in the absence of a clear definition of public policy and a sound management model, in times of crisis decisions are made blindly. A roadmap, including a strategic plan defining the library's mission and primary objectives, is imperative. Strategic planning is consequently essential in crises. In environments such as the not-for-profit sector where resources are limited, planning is a tool for both making and optimising decisions. In another vein, as public institutions associated with cultural heritage management, libraries should gear their strategic planning to generating (and substantiating) public value (Herguner, 2015).

This study, prompted by Europe's economic crisis, aimed to respond to the following research queries:

- Did the crisis affect Europe's national libraries?
- Did the existence of a strategic plan, where applicable, help them better cope with the crisis?

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Libraries and the economic crisis*

Since its onset, the economic crisis has inspired reams of articles on its impact on many of the countries affected. A number of papers has attempted to explain the crisis from the perspective of specialised academic or public libraries (Mostad-Jensen, 2009; Guarria, 2011; Harvey Chaputula, 2011).

In Europe, some universities were affected as early as 2009 (Ipsos MORI, 2009) by budget cuts of 5 % to 10 % (European University Association, 2011), with implications for basic services like libraries. Studies on university libraries have discussed their need to proactively parry the implications of lower budgets, compounded by inflation, for collection growth (Simón Martín, Arias Coello and Simón Blas, 2016). The collateral

effects of the crisis on academic libraries since 2008 have been described in detail, along with strategic and tactical proposals and measures to confront them (Lloret Romero, 2011). The crisis has also been viewed as an externally imposed opportunity to implement a new model (Martínez, Prats and Serrano-Muñoz, 2011).

Under such difficult circumstances, librarians have adopted creative and innovative measures to maintain service quality and meet user needs with fewer resources. Although the situation has generated high stress levels (Guarria and Wang, 2011), library managers have exhibited leadership and an ability to adapt their roles to the changing circumstances (Nicholas et. al, 2010), while acknowledging the pressure brought to bear by financial constraints. Cooperation and association with other libraries, other information service providers and other university communities have been essential.

Data on the implications of the crisis for public libraries have also been published. The inference drawn from the information available is that despite stagnated allocations, they have had to rise to the population's growing use of library services (Mostad-Jensen, 2009). In Spain, their response has led to the consolidation of public libraries as the backbone of the country's library system, reinforcing their position as a citizens' support service (Arroyo, Hernández and Villoldo, 2011; Hernández and Arroyo, 2014). The crisis has enhanced libraries' already substantial social role in many cities as integrated hubs for users with information needs (Gutiérrez Santana et al., 2010). Readers wanting to be better informed have been shown to visit libraries more often and use their resources more assiduously, whilst the economic situation has been reported to affect their choice of content to at least some extent (González Quesada, Jiménez López and Ajenjo Cosp, 2015). In Greece, another country particularly hard hit by the crisis, public libraries have earned acknowledgement as economic assets. They are viewed as a magnet for people able to fuel local trade, establish restaurants and hotels, generate revenues and lend support to Greece's troubled society and economy (Kostagiolas, Margiola and Avramidou, 2011).

Although as institutions for a country's highest level of cultural dissemination, national libraries like all other public bodies must have felt the impact of the crisis, no studies on

that impact were identified in the literature. One of the scant allusions to the subject was found in the Conference of European National Libraries' (hereafter, CENL) strategic plan 2015-18. In line 3, Key strategic challenges, a paragraph under the heading 'Financial and political contexts' reads: *'Many national libraries, alongside other public sector organisations, have faced an unprecedented period of budget cuts and restrictions over the past few years and it is generally expected that there is more to come in the future. At the same time as libraries are expected to demonstrate better value for money, they are also expected to be more "open" to the public generally and to make their collections more widely available than in the past'* (CENL, 2015).

The word 'many' is appropriate here bearing in mind the disparity in cultural spending among European Union countries identified by the Fundación Catalunya Europa (2016). According to that study cultural spending in southern European countries has declined to 36 percentage points below the mean, placing them at 86 percentage points from central and 117 from northern European countries. The same study notes that the pattern of budgetary allocations for culture was interrupted in most European countries with the advent of the crisis in 2008. Cost-cutting began with the 2009 budgets, particularly in Spain, Greece and other peripheral euro zone economies. García et al. (2016) reported that the most drastic reductions in Portuguese public spending, recorded in 2010-2014 (with a minimum of 4.9 % in 2014), affected different types of cultural institutions such as libraries and archives, the former in particular.

The general cutbacks introduced by most public authorities are visible in the annual reports in which each country's major cultural institutions describe the facts and figures most relevant to their activity. In its annual reports for 2012 to 2017, Spain's national library, for instance, noted that the budget allocated in all those years was lower than in 2009, for a cumulative decline of 43.4 % (National Library of Spain, 2017, p. 110). The Portuguese institution's annual report for 2012 mentioned that the funds raised by the library itself would amount to just 59 % of the sum initially expected, mirroring the crisis afflicting the country. The State allocation for operating expenses dipped by 9.3 %, due in part to governmental measures to constrain spending. Investment funding was also

impacted, after a Ministerial Order mandated a 10 % downward revision of the sum initially approved (National Library of Portugal, 2012, p. 56).

The situation in countries such as Denmark and Austria seems to have differed, however, for the libraries' annual reports made no reference to drastic cost-cutting. Allocations appeared to have remained flat or risen slightly. According to the Danish library's reports, the total budget in 2014 was DKK402.3 million, up from DKK359.0 million in 2008 (Royal Library, 2008 and 2014). The income statements in the annual reports for 2011-2013 published by the Austrian institution showed no variation in State funding in that period, which came to €23.028 million yearly (Austrian National Library, 2011, p. 61). In 2018, however, the allocation rose to €25.820 million, according to the income statement for that year (Austrian National Library, 2018).

## *2.2. Strategic planning in national libraries*

As public institutions, national libraries have engaged in planning for decades. The earliest papers on the subject date from the nineteen eighties in the wake of the introduction of the new public management (NPM) approach that entailed strategic management (Düren, 2009).

Interest in implementing strategic planning and management in the public sector has been long and amply addressed in the literature, which has identified limitations relative to the private context (Eadie, 1983; Ring and Perry, 1985; Bryson and Roering, 1987). Its two dimensions, 'minimization of the role of government vis-a-vis society and the improvement of the internal performance of the public sector' (De Vries and Nemeč, 2013, p. 4), have likewise been debated.

The pursuit of efficacy and efficiency stemming from a growing awareness of the shortage of public resources has been one of the primary drivers of strategic planning in the sector. Public institutions' strategic plans are conceived as support for the change from resource- to results-based management (Nartisa, Putans and Muravska, 2012). Nonetheless, 'the way an organization implements strategy has consequences for

outcomes and an organization's performance' (Poister et al, 2010, p. 539): hence the emphasis on effective implementation.

The studies on NPM application to libraries are limited to academic and public institutions. In the sole paper found on the subject that did not bemoan the adverse effects of NPM and the 'age of austerity' (Düren, Landøy and Saarti, 2017), Düren (2009) focused on the German National Library of Science and Technology's use of a balanced scoreboard (BSC) as an example of a possible strategic management system for libraries.

Strategic planning in national libraries has been firmly supported by some professional librarians. Maurice Line (1983), for instance, a staunch planning advocate who consistently extolled its benefits, defined the British Library's first strategic plan in 1985 as exemplary. Even in times of economic and political instability Line recommended that libraries should be forward-looking, establish goals and formulate a strategy for reaching them. One of the primary benefits of strategic planning lies less in the plan itself than in its formulation. If the entire library staff is involved, it helps to appropriately develop attitudes and strategic management skills, in addition to encouraging participation and engagement (Line, 1995). Any strategic plan must be both aspirational and inspiring but realistic and attainable, for otherwise the outcome is deception, disappointment or even disapproval (Donlon, 1991).

Donlon and Line (1992) recommended strategic planning in national libraries to deal with a series of situations such as scale-backs in funding and the need to justify and review functions as well as to 'earn more of their own keep' (p. 84), using the National Library of Ireland as a case in point. Over time other authors have defended practically the same idea: national libraries should define strategic guidelines able to adjust to the changing environment in which they operate because strategic development helps them decide where to best allocate resources (Penny, 2005).

A survey of 11 national libraries conducted in 1996 by the National Library of New Zealand was the sole paper identified that affords an overview of planning techniques and strategies in such libraries (Chalmers, 1997). That research revealed a diversity of

approaches as well as areas of convergence. Unanimity was also observed in some respects, such as the benefits of strategic management despite the effort required of library staff.

McInnes (2009) reviewed the relationship between strategic planning, national libraries and contexts of change. The experience of 14 national libraries engaging in strategic planning served as a basis for identifying the key factors for sustainable strategic planning in a changing environment. The author proposed strategic planning based on the five-I model (impact, inclusion, integration, innovation and imagination) and suggested ways to integrate the model in organisational culture.

The experience of some national libraries attests to their adherence to strategic planning. Examples include the British Library (Macartney, 1986) and the national libraries of Scotland (Wade, 2013), which formulated its first plan in 2004, Ireland and Norway (Bassen et al., 2015) and Austria (Mayr, 2018). Studies on the National Library of Netherlands focused on areas of its strategic plan that affect specific resources such as staff (Langbroek, 2010) or strategies such as marketing (Moore, 2001). These European institutions serve as examples of national libraries that have long viewed strategic planning as an ally.

Although support for strategic planning in national libraries is demonstrated in the literature, a recent study on the priorities of European national libraries reveals that there are few libraries that, if they have a plan, have it accessible at their website for consultation by interested citizens in know their future direction (Pacios and Martínez, 2019).

Particularly, Austrian, Danish, Maltese, Portuguese and Spanish national libraries related to this work show that they plan. That they plan can be gleaned from their websites. The strategic plans published on the websites of all except the Maltese library (at this writing), attest to their use of that management technique. The Spanish and Portuguese websites also carry detailed yearly assessments that stand as proof of plan implementation. More specifically, the latest monitoring report on the BNE's Strategic

Plan 2015-20, referring to target year 2016, gives the percentage of compliance with each objective and the actions undertaken (National Library of Spain, 2016). The Portuguese National Library, which has also defined a strategic plan for 2015-20, includes information on plan implementation in its annual reports, available from 2011 to 2018. The self-assessment of the degree of compliance with yearly objectives contained in these reports lists the results attained as well as any deviations, as appropriate (National Library of Portugal, 2016).

The Royal Danish Library (so named since 2017 after the merger of a number of institutions, including the country's national and the University of Copenhagen's libraries) has uploaded its strategic plan for 2015-18, although apparently no follow-up report. Nonetheless, it publishes summaries of its Annual Report (available for 2000-2014) that carry a brief synopsis of project implementation, strategic targets and some of the results delivered (Royal Library, 2014).

The National Library of Austria's website carries its strategic plan for the period 2017-21 (Austrian National Library, 2017). In the introduction, Director Johanna Rachinger makes explicit reference to the successful implementation of the plan for the preceding period, 2012-2016. The annual reports for 2011 to 2018 also mention the successful implementation of specific strategies and projects in 2012-16.

All this open-access information attests to strategic plan implementation and monitoring on the part of national libraries, although the degree of detail varies among institutions, as noted earlier.

### **3. Objectives and method**

In light of the scant information on the impact of the crisis on European national libraries, this study was undertaken with a dual objective. First, it sought to determine whether the economic crisis affected European libraries and second, whether having a strategic plan at the time helped adopt decisions more in keeping with the situation at hand. The starting hypothesis was that NLs, like other public institutions, were affected

by the crisis. A second hypothesis assumed that libraries with a strategic plan should have found it easier to reallocate resources or adapt strategies to the changing scenario. In times of crisis, given the drastic change they bring, strategic planning is presumed to help national libraries in much the same way it aids companies and other organisations (Wilson and Eilertsen, 2010).

The present study was based on an online English language Googleforms survey, in which the data were gathered by means of a questionnaire. The targets were the directors of the 49 European libraries affiliated with the CENL, the library network in place in all Council of Europe Member States. The URL to access the questionnaire was sent by personalised email to each director in September 2018. In light of the scant participation, a reminder was mailed in November of that year.

In addition to data on library and director identity, the questionnaire consisted in 14 structured questions grouped under four headings: a) Attitude toward planning; b) Preparation prior to and during the crisis; c) Response to the crisis y d) Measures prompted by the crisis.

The questions under the latter two headings were to be answered only by libraries that had a strategic plan during the crisis. Two of the questions were open, whereas the 12 closed items called for an affirmative / negative, five-point Likert scale (with 1 signifying no and 5 full agreement) or multiple-choice answer.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

The title of this study is indicative of the results, for only five libraries or 10.2 % of the total (n=49) answered the survey. Responses were received from the directors of the Austrian, Danish, Maltese, Portuguese and Spanish national libraries. This paper consequently describes the situation faced by that small sampling of national libraries during the crisis, without drawing any general conclusions, as was initially planned. Inasmuch as these five national libraries might be regarded as cases of good strategic

planning practice, dissemination of the survey results was deemed to be of possible professional interest, given the inter-country similarities and differences observed.

As Reimer (2018) noted, one of national libraries' key attributes is to be of service to all those who enter their (physical or virtual) doors, in defence of global infrastructure for open knowledge. Such institutions' collaboration is vital to research about their procedures and constitutes an ideal opportunity to enhance a general understanding of what they do and how.

The findings for each item on the questionnaire are discussed below.

#### *4.1. Attitude toward planning (Table I)*

A fairly tight consensus was reached in the answers to the first item 'Strategic planning is useful for shaping the future and allocating resources', with four scores of 5 and one of 4.

Each director replied differently to the second item on whether a library's entire staff should participate in planning. One failed to answer and the other four expressed degrees of agreement from 2 to 5. The replies exhibited no clear pattern relative to library staff size, which ranged widely from 27 to 750, for the directors answered as follows (staff size followed in brackets by the director's reply): 750 (2), 431 (5), 200 (4), 27 (3). Only one library, with a staff of 217, failed to answer the question.

All five libraries had a strategic plan both during the crisis and at the time of the survey and four, the exception being Malta, had published it on their website in the two timeframes. A search for strategic plans on the websites of all 49 CENL libraries was not particularly successful, however. In March 2019 11 up-to-date strategic plans were found for national libraries in Austria, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Moldavia, Portugal, Scotland, Spain and United Kingdom. In Netherlands and Denmark, as the latest plans published concluded in 2018, the new plans will more than likely be uploaded in the near future, as they have in the past. The fact that no plan is found on

a library's website obviously does not mean it has none. Nonetheless, libraries that have one should make it public to inform any interested website visitor of what they do and why and how they do it. From an educator's perspective, moreover, such documents are of enormous value for training future library professionals.

<b>A. Attitude toward planning (n=5)</b>					
1. Strategic planning is useful for shaping the future and allocating resources	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4 (1)</b>	<b>5(4)</b>
2. The entire library staff should be involved in the planning process	<b>1</b>	<b>2(1)</b>	<b>3(1)</b>	<b>4 (1)</b>	<b>5(1)</b>
3. Does your national library have a strategic plan at this time?	<b>YES (5) / NO (0)</b>				
4. If it does have a strategic plan, is it published on the library's website?	<b>YES (4) / NO (1)</b>				

Table I. Questions and answers under the first heading on the questionnaire

Publication of the institution's strategic plan is a transparency indicator. In Spain, Act 19/2013 on Transparency, Access to Public Information and Good Governance requires public institutions to publish their plans on their websites. On its Transparency page, the National Library complies with those provisions, affording access to all its strategic plans, including the one in effect for 2015-2020.

#### 4.2. Preparation prior to and during the crisis (Table II)

Likewise on a 5-point scale (1, minimally to 5, greatly), the five libraries indicated how severely they were affected by the crisis. Malta replied outside the questionnaire that as the library had not been affected by the crisis, the remaining questionnaire items were left blank. The other four libraries scored the impact of the crisis as follows: Austria (1), Denmark (3), Portugal (4) and Spain (5). Even in such a small sample, then, the replies denoted differences between northern-central and southern European countries.

The answers to the other four items under this heading confirmed that all the libraries had a strategic plan at the outset of the crisis and had to formulate a new one in 2007-2017. Having a plan did not benefit all the libraries equally, for the item on whether its

presence had made it easier to confront the crisis received one score of 5, two of 4 and one of 2.

<b>B) Preparation prior to and during the crisis (n=4)</b>					
5. Please assess the extent to which the library was affected by the crisis	1 (1)	2	3 (1)	4 (1)	5(2)
6. Did the library have a strategic plan when the crisis began?	<b>YES (4) / NO (0)</b>				
7. If the reply to the preceding question was NO, to what extent do you think having one would have made it easier to confront the crisis	<b>YES (0) / NO (0)</b>				
8. Was a strategic plan formulated during the crisis (2007-2017)?	<b>YES (4) / NO (0)</b>				
9. If the reply to the preceding question was YES, to what extent do you think the plan was beneficial for confronting the crisis.	1	2 (1)	3	4 (2)	5(1)

Table II. Questions and answers under the second heading on the questionnaire

#### 4.3. Response to the crisis (Table III)

This heading covered four items designed to determine the benefits deriving from having a strategic plan. The benefits identified, reported by the Danish and Spanish libraries only, are given in Table III, which show that they concurred in only one of the items: having priorities.

Only the Portuguese library was obliged to adapt its plan to the new circumstances, specifically by downsizing its organisational structure, budget and staff. Staff restructuring after redundancies was one of the consequences of the crisis described by other national libraries, such as Italy's (Bellingeri and Giunti, 2017).

All the libraries monitored plan implementation during the crisis, as confirmed by the information in the annual reports published by four of them, Spain and Portugal in particular, as discussed above.

<b>C) Response to the crisis (only for libraries that had or formulated a strategic plan during the crisis) (n=4)</b>
<p>10. If you deem that having or having formulated a strategic plan during the crisis was beneficial, please identify three benefits, ranked in descending order of significance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- having priorities (2);</li> <li>- dialogue with stakeholders (1);</li> <li>- in-house communication (1);</li> <li>- heightening of staff awareness of spending constraints (1);</li> <li>- enhancement of economic efficiency (1)</li> </ul>
<p>11. With the onset of the crisis, were you obliged to change the strategic plan to adapt it to the new circumstances?</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>YES (1) / NO (3)</b></p>
<p>12. If the reply to the preceding question was affirmative, please list three factors or resources included in the plan that were affected by the crisis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- downsize of the library organizational structure (1);</li> <li>- reduction of Budget (1);</li> <li>- reduction of human resources (1).</li> </ul>
<p>13. Did you monitor the strategic plan that was in place or formulated during the crisis?</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>YES (4) / NO (0)</b></p>

Table III. Questions and answers under the third heading on the questionnaire

#### 4.4. Measures prompted by the crisis (Table IV)

Strategic planning helped libraries adopt crisis-induced decisions in the areas listed in Table IV, where the number of libraries answering affirmatively and negatively are shown in brackets. All four respondents identified resource reallocation, change in working procedures, identification of services in need of greater support and detection of staff-related needs as measures prompted by the crisis. Only Spanish library answered no to identification of new opportunities.

<b>D) Measures prompted by the crisis (only for libraries that had or formulated a strategic plan during the crisis) (n=4)</b>	
14. Please specify whether the strategic plan helped you make decisions prompted by the crisis with respect to the items listed below:	
a) Resource reallocation	<b>YES (4) / NO (0)</b>
b) Identification of new opportunities	<b>YES (3) / NO (1)</b>
c) Change in working procedures	<b>YES (4) / NO (0)</b>
d) Identification of services in need of greater support	<b>YES (4) / NO (0)</b>
e) Identification of services that should not be offered	<b>YES (0) / NO (4)</b>
f) Change in hours services were available	<b>YES (2) / NO (2)</b>
g) Fund-raising from new sources	<b>YES (3) / NO (1)</b>
h) Intention to charge for formerly cost-free services	<b>YES (3) / NO (1)</b>
i) Detection of staff-related needs (downsizing, hiring, training, promotion, versatility)	<b>YES (4) / NO (0)</b>
j) If staff needs were detected, please specify which of the above or any others were involved	
- training (3)	
- downsizing (2) and more specifically, do more in-house training for updating skills;	
- revision of workflows and technical procedures (1);	
- tighter criteria in the acquisition of new human resources, with specific profiles (1);	
- hiring (1);	
- promotion (1);	
- versatility (1).	

Table IV. Questions and answers under the fourth heading on the questionnaire

The space provided on the questionnaire for commenting on the items was used by only the Portuguese director, who noted that as governmental cost-cutting decisions were made with no heed to the library's strategic plan, they translated into budget constraints. The plan was nonetheless deemed to have been useful for guiding library management measures.

## 5. Conclusions

The degree to which the Great Recession affected libraries had a clearly geographic dimension that ran parallel to the situation in the respective countries. The difference in public cultural spending in southern and eastern compared to northern and central European countries, which widened during the crisis, was visible in this group of national libraries' answers to the item on the degree to which they were impacted by the crisis: Malta (0), Austria (1), Denmark (3), Portugal (4) and Spain (5). The first three would be in the low impact or quick recovery group, and Portugal and Spain in the high impact group, Spain especially, where spending declined even more steeply than in Portugal. The situation of the four affected mirrored the severity of the crisis and their respective governments' reactions, which had a direct impact on cultural organisations (Bonet and Donato, 20119), with some cutting back public funds and others endeavouring to maintain the pre-crisis allocations.

The data failed to support the first hypothesis that contended that the crisis affected all European national libraries as public institutions: even in this small sample one of the countries, Malta, reported having been unaffected. That response was in line with the country's situation at the time, for the Maltese financial sector was one of the few to have come through the crisis with barely a scar.

A crisis of such dimensions would justify the formulation of a strategic plan in any organisation having to confront it, in keeping with Ander Egg's (1991, p. 35) contention that the greater the challenges faced and the larger the number of problems in need of simultaneous solution, the greater the need for planning. That notwithstanding, a good strategic plan does not suffice. To be effective, it must be implemented by the policy-makers responsible. Planners are not in exclusive control of what they plan (Friedmann, 2001). One of the libraries' reply to an item on the questionnaire bore witness to that reality, with the respondent noting that while a strategic plan was in place, it was not taken into consideration in governmental cost-cutting decisions.

Although all these libraries deploy strategic planning and constitute examples of good practice, the same cannot be said of all other European libraries, only 23 % of which had published a plan on their website at the time of the survey. While they may have had one, non-publication precluded both outward projection of what they do and citizens' subscription to the process.

The second hypothesis, according to which a strategic plan is beneficial when confronting a changing scenario, was borne out by the findings. Thanks to having a plan, these libraries found it easier to identify priorities and benefited as well in other respects such as dialogue with stakeholders, in-house communication, heightening of staff awareness of spending constraints and enhancement of economic efficiency. Not all the institutions found having a plan to be equally advantageous, however. The Portuguese library, for instance, had to modify its intentions in light of the government's decision to cut costs and consequently make further efforts to adapt to the situation and adopt the respective decisions accordingly. Austrian, Danish, Portuguese and Spanish national libraries identified resource reallocation, change in working procedures, identification of services in need of greater support and detection of staff-related needs as measures prompted by the crisis. All libraries were able to identify new opportunities except Spanish library.

The existence of a strategic plan in all these libraries stands as proof that as institutions handling public resources they internalise the task as a way of regulating their activity and ensuring that it generates results that citizens can see and measure. That is especially true when the strategic plan is uploaded to their websites, a circumstance associated with management transparency. Strategic planning indisputably enhances management performance and reinforces libraries' role as institutions offering citizens a public service in times of crisis. Although some sectors may deem culture and cultural heritage to be luxuries that society cannot afford in such times, they must in fact be shown to be not an expense but rather assets to be conserved and fostered for a better future (Garlandini, 2013, p. 37).

The strategic planning-related measures for confronting the crisis where broadest consensus was reached were resource reallocation and the detection of staff training needs. The latter, the need to prepare human capital for new demands identified during the crisis, has been described as a recovery strategy implemented by some organisations (Ramos and Peiró, 2014).

The public sector was severely impacted by the crisis and the institutions impacted, national libraries among them, must draw learnings from that experience. Public disclosure of such lessons by the institutions concerned would be of great interest, emulating action taken by museums which, like libraries, form part of a country's national identity (Bergeron, 2009/10; ICOM, 2014).

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