

Proposed draft law for public libraries in Egypt

Report – English Summary

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Abstract

This proposed draft law for public libraries in Egypt addresses the urgent need for a legislative framework to govern public libraries in Egypt. Despite the recent growth in the number and reach of public libraries, there remains a significant legislative vacuum that hinders their optimal operation, equitable distribution, and integration into national development efforts.

The document outlines the justifications for enacting such a law, emphasizing the evolving role of public libraries as dynamic community centers that support lifelong learning, promote digital literacy, enhance employability, preserve local heritage, and contribute to sustainable development. It also discusses the inconsistencies and inequalities in the current public library landscape in Egypt, including the lack of standardization, poor coordination among supervising bodies, and inadequate access in rural and underdeveloped regions.

The proposed law is grounded in foundational principles such as accessibility, equity, modernity, professionalism, community engagement, and integration with national goals. It draws from international experiences and aligns with global best practices, particularly those outlined in UNESCO's comparative studies.

The proposed legislative text sets out clear definitions, mandates every governorate to establish a networked system of libraries, and details the structure, services, governance, funding, and oversight mechanisms for these systems. A special emphasis is placed on decentralization, community representation, technical standards, and national collaboration through a unified national library network led by Egypt Public Library (Maktabet Misr Al-Amma).

Overall, the proposal aims to institutionalize the role of public libraries as essential public services that contribute meaningfully to Egypt's social, cultural, and economic development within the framework of the "New Republic" and its vision for human development and sustainability.

Keywords

Public libraries, law and legislation, Egypt

1. Introduction and Rationale for the Proposed Law

The document, prepared by Dr. Mostafa Hossam El Din, an assistant professor at Cairo University, highlights an urgent need for a legislative framework to regulate public library operations in Egypt. Despite significant progress in the number, spread, and services of public libraries, the sector still suffers from a legislative vacuum that impedes optimal performance, affects the equitable distribution of services, and hinders community development.

The proposed law aims to rectify this by establishing a unified vision and integrated network for public libraries, ensuring consistent quality of services for all segments of society. It emphasizes the vital role of public libraries as "dynamic community centers" that support lifelong learning, promote digital culture, empower citizens economically, socially, and culturally, and preserve local heritage.

The project is rooted in principles of equal access, equal opportunities, technological utilization, sound governance, and community integration. It also draws heavily from leading international experiences, particularly UNESCO's comparative study of public library legislation worldwide.

2. The Current State of Public Libraries in Egypt: Identified Deficiencies

The document identifies several shortcomings in the current public library landscape in Egypt:

- **Absence of a Unified Legal Framework:** There is no comprehensive law to govern the establishment, operation, and coordination of public libraries. Existing legislation is limited to resolutions for the establishment of specific libraries, leading to a lack of structure and clear mechanisms for effective service delivery.
- **Multiplicity and Diversity of Managing Bodies:** Public library services are managed by various governmental bodies (e.g., Ministries of Culture, Local Development, Social Solidarity, Youth and Sports) and non-governmental organizations. This fragmentation leads to **variations in technical, human, and financial resources**, resulting in inconsistent quality of services.
- **Lack of Clear Definition and Counting:** There is no standardized definition of what constitutes a "public library" in Egypt, making it difficult to accurately count their number or determine the scope of their services and beneficiaries.
- **Inequitable Distribution of Services:** Public library services are not equitably distributed across governorates, failing to account for population density, geographical diversity (urban vs. rural, Delta, Upper Egypt, border governorates), and the specific needs of different communities.
- **Varying Standards and Quality:** There is a significant disparity in the application of international quantitative and qualitative standards for public libraries. Some libraries meet high professional standards, while others continue to operate under outdated practices from over a century ago.
- **Lack of Cooperation and Coordination:** The absence of cooperation, coordination, and integration among libraries has negatively impacted their capabilities, performance, and the efficient utilization of resources.
- **Decline in International Standing:** Despite Egypt's historical significance in library development (e.g., the ancient Library of Alexandria), the ranking of Egyptian public libraries on an international level has declined.

3. Core Principles and Foundations of the Proposed Law (Manfalaqat)

The proposed law is built upon a set of fundamental principles:

- **Building the Egyptian Individual:** Public libraries are recognized as a crucial tool for building the Egyptian individual in the "New Republic," contributing to sustainable and comprehensive human development.
- **Justice, Equality, and Equal Opportunities:** Access to public libraries and their services must be available to all citizens "without discrimination," ensuring justice and equal opportunities.
- **Modern and Developed Services:** Public libraries should offer advanced information, knowledge, and research services that cater to the needs of all Egyptian citizens.
- **Preservation of Heritage:** Public libraries are to serve as centers for collecting, preserving, and making available local oral and recorded heritage.
- **Technological Integration:** Libraries must adopt modern information and communication technologies in managing their collections and delivering services.
- **Qualified Staff:** Libraries must be staffed by qualified individuals with the skills and capabilities to manage collections, activities, social work, and leadership.
- **Professional Standards:** The establishment and development of public libraries should adhere to professional standards that consider local conditions while aligning with international standards.
- **Continuous Performance Evaluation:** Library activities and services should undergo continuous quantitative and qualitative performance evaluation to improve efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Benchmarking:** Public library programs and services should be benchmarked against relevant standards based on library size, type, and target beneficiaries.
- **National System for Cooperation and Integration:** A national system for public libraries should foster cooperation, coordination, and integration in performing activities and services, ensuring efficient resource utilization.
- **Sufficient Resources:** The national public library system must have adequate resources to ensure its sustainability and interactive relationship with the surrounding environment.
- **Social Responsibility:** The national public library system should fulfill its social responsibilities, empowering citizens with knowledge about societal challenges, aiding in finding solutions, and collaborating with other institutions in educational, social, cultural, and health services.
- **Supporting Creativity and Citizenship Values:** The public library system should support citizens' creative abilities and contribute to disseminating values of citizenship, democracy, tolerance, and acceptance of others.

4. International Experiences and the Legislative Urgency

The document refers to Frank M. Gardner's 1971 UNESCO study, "Public library legislation: a comparative study," which analyzed public library laws in various countries (Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, UK, Ireland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Canada, USA, Ghana, Tanzania, Botswana, India). This study identified 22 key principles that should guide the formulation of public library laws, mirroring the foundational principles adopted in this proposed Egyptian law.

The continuous evolution of public library laws in other countries since 1971 underscores the "absence of a mandatory legislative framework" in Egypt. This national necessity drives the proposed law, aiming to unify and integrate efforts regarding public libraries in Egypt.

5. Proposed Law Text: Key Articles and Definitions

The proposed law includes a "Preamble" and several articles defining key concepts and outlining responsibilities:

Preamble: The preamble asserts the right to knowledge as a fundamental human right, essential for empowering Egyptian citizens and enabling lifelong learning for personal and societal development. It states that the law aims to provide the necessary legislative framework for establishing and developing public libraries and ensuring their services are accessible to all citizens across all governorates "without discrimination."

Ministry of Local Development's Role: The Ministry of Local Development is assigned the responsibility for implementing and monitoring the law across all governorates, considering public libraries as vital public facilities contributing to local development.

Key Definitions:

- **Public Library:** "A collection of information resources selected to meet the general information, knowledge, and research needs of all citizens in a specific location... organized and made available to these citizens without discrimination, offering various activities and services, managed by one or more qualified professionals."
- **Public Library Services:** "Various types and forms of activities and efforts provided by public libraries... enabling citizens to benefit from their resources, acquire knowledge, awareness, and skills to meet their informational, knowledge, and research needs, and contribute to developing or changing their cultural, intellectual, economic, social, and technological conditions, especially for youth and women."
- **Network System for Public Libraries:** "A group of public libraries of different sizes (main library, branch libraries, service points) integrated through technical applications and material and programmatic equipment, aiming to provide information, knowledge, and research services to all citizens in the governorate without discrimination, equally and effectively."
- **Main Public Library:** "The public library established in the governorate capital, containing the largest collections of information resources, and possessing the material, organizational, and human capabilities to lead the public library network system in the governorate."
- **Branch Public Library:** "A public library that offers its services to all citizens in a residential area... like a district, center, village, hamlet, or other residential gatherings."
- **Service Point for the Branch Library / Public Library Service Point:** "A fixed or mobile location from which branch library services are offered to citizens in remote residential areas... away from the heart of cities or centers or villages or hamlets."

Article 1: States that the Preamble is an integral part of the law.

Article 2: Mandates each governorate in Egypt to establish a **network system for public libraries** to provide information, knowledge, and research services to all citizens across all residential areas "without discrimination."

Article 3: Emphasizes that the network system must provide services to all citizens within the governorate "**without discrimination**" based on origin, ethnicity, color, political affiliation, sect, religion, gender, age, economic status, social status, educational level, professional status, or special needs.

Article 4: Outlines the objectives of the network system's services, focusing on **empowering citizens** by contributing to: * Developing self-learning through acquiring knowledge, skills, capabilities, and values that improve cultural, intellectual, economic, social, and technological conditions, especially for youth and women. * Promoting correct awareness of local, national, and global issues (political, economic, social, health, cultural, psychological, philosophical, historical, environmental, technological, scientific) and enabling informed interaction. * Fostering a good understanding of local history, national identity, and symbols. * Promoting positive participation in addressing local and national societal challenges. * Nurturing creativity, innovation, and talent in scientific, literary, artistic, and musical fields.

Article 5: Details the types of information and library services provided by the network system: * Providing diverse information resources based on a defined collection development policy. * Providing tools and channels to facilitate access to information resources within and outside the network system. * Allowing use of acquired information resources within and outside the network's components. * Offering various library and information services to transform information content into knowledge, empowering citizens (especially youth and women) culturally, intellectually, economically, socially, and technologically. * Cooperating with governmental and non-governmental organizations to achieve sustainable development goals.

Article 6: Specifies that the network system in each governorate will consist of a main public library in the capital and a number of branch libraries and service points distributed across residential areas. It mandates **coordination and integration** among these components, including existing public libraries (governmental and civil society-affiliated).

Article 7: Establishes a "**Board of Directors**" to manage the network system, responsible for setting policies, issuing regulations (technical, financial, administrative), appointing the system director, approving the budget, accepting grants, and facilitating cooperation agreements.

Article 8: Details the composition of the Board of Directors, to be formed by a decision from the Minister of Local Development, comprising a chairman (the Governor) and ten members including representatives from the Public Library of Egypt (Regional Libraries), the Ministry of Culture, the General Authority for Cultural Palaces, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and four local community representatives (intellectuals, youth, women, businessmen). * **Note:** A critical observation within the text highlights the **absence of a clear role for the Minister of Culture** or a representative from the Ministry of Culture within the proposed Board of Directors, despite a representative from the General Authority for Cultural Palaces being included. This might be a point for further review and discussion.

Article 9: Sets the term of the Board of Directors at **five years**, with meetings held at least every six months, and an annual report submitted to the Minister of Local Development.

Article 10: States that the construction and facilities for the network system must adhere to national and international standards for public libraries in terms of architectural and interior design.

Article 11: Stipulates that the network system will be subject to **technical oversight from the Public Library of Egypt (Regional Libraries)**, which will provide policies, guidelines, technical applications, and training programs consistent with national and international standards.

Article 12: Identifies the **governorate's budget as the main source of funding** for the network system, supplemented by accepted grants and donations. A special account will be established in a national bank for system expenditures.

Article 13: Mandates **cooperation, coordination, and integration** among all public library network systems across governorates to establish a "**national cluster**" for public libraries in Egypt. The Public Library of Egypt (Regional Libraries) will be responsible for setting the terms for joining this cluster, defining its structure, functions, and services, and overseeing its management and operation.

Article 14: Requires the network system in each governorate to prepare **standard statistics** on its resources, activities, and services, and to provide reports to the Board of Directors on these statistics and their adherence to performance indicators based on public library standards.

Conclusion

The proposed law represents a comprehensive effort to modernize and standardize public library services in Egypt, addressing long-standing legislative and operational gaps. By establishing a national network, promoting equitable access, embracing technology, and emphasizing community development, the law seeks to elevate the role of public libraries as vital institutions for building an informed, empowered, and culturally rich Egyptian society in line with the "New Republic's" vision for sustainable human development. The noted observation regarding the Ministry of Culture's representation on the Board of Directors warrants attention during further review and implementation.