



Public Library Expenditure in Europe: Indicators and Calculators

Poraba v evropskih splošnih knjižnicah: kazalniki in izračuni

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Abstract

This article considers indicators in library statistics and the need for calculators to be used by politicians and policy-makers. It presents the indicators and the calculators related to library expenditure used by Rete delle Reti, an Italian association for libraries. The three indicators are library expenditure as per thousand of gross domestic product (GDP), library expenditure as per thousand of government expenditure, and library expenditure as a percentage of expenditure for cultural services. Three calculators allow each European library to calculate indicators at local, regional, or national level and compare them with a range of European indicators related to library expenditure. The first indicator – library expenditure as per thousand of gross domestic product – assesses the role of libraries in the national community and whether they are considered main actors in the construction of a sustainable, democratic, and equal society. It shows whether, and to what extent, governments are committed to supporting libraries. The second indicator – library expenditure as per thousand of government expenditure – evaluates how important libraries are in public policy and how relevant they are in the provision of public goods and services. This indicator can be used at the regional/municipal level to assess the relevance of public libraries to local politicians. The third indicator – library expenditure as a percentage of expenditure for cultural services – is more qualitative. It evaluates cultural engagement at the local level and the role the libraries play here. All indicators/calculators conform to the COFOG (Classification of the Functions of Government methodology), adopted by OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), and Eurostat (European Statistical Office). We hope that many libraries and, in particular, all agencies producing nation-



al-level library statistics in Europe will adopt these indicators/calculators in their daily practices.

Keywords: library statistics, library indicators, library calculators, library expenditure, library policy and planning, Europe

Izveček

Članek obravnava kazalnike v knjižnični statistiki in potrebo po izračunih, ki jih uporabljajo politiki in oblikovalci politik. Predstavljeni so kazalniki in izračuni, povezani z izdatki za knjižnice, ki jih uporablja italijansko združenje knjižnic Rete delle Reti. Trije kazalniki so: izdatki za knjižnice na promil bruto domačega proizvoda (BDP), izdatki za knjižnice na promil državnih izdatkov in izdatki za knjižnice kot odstotek izdatkov za kulturne storitve. Trije izračuni omogočajo vsaki evropski knjižnici, da jih izračuna na lokalni, regionalni ali nacionalni ravni in jih primerja z vrsto evropskih kazalnikov, povezanih s knjižničnimi izdatki. Prvi kazalnik – knjižnični izdatki na promil bruto domačega proizvoda – ocenjuje vlogo knjižnic v nacionalni skupnosti in ali veljajo za glavne deležnike pri oblikovanju trajnostne, demokratične in enakopravne družbe. Pokaže, ali in v kolikšni meri so vlade zavezane podpiranju knjižnic. Drugi kazalnik – izdatki za knjižnice na promil državnih izdatkov – ocenjuje, kako pomembne so knjižnice v javnih politikah in kako pomembne so pri zagotavljanju javnih dobrin in storitev. Ta kazalnik se lahko uporablja na regionalni/občinski ravni za ocenjevanje pomena splošnih knjižnic pri lokalnih politikih. Tretji kazalnik – izdatki za knjižnice kot odstotek izdatkov za kulturne storitve – je bolj kvalitativen. Z njim se ocenjuje kulturno udejstvovanje na lokalni ravni in vloga, ki jo imajo pri tem knjižnice. Vsi kazalniki / kalkulatorji so v skladu z metodologijo Klasifikacije funkcij države (COFOG), ki sta jo sprejela Organizacija za gospodarsko sodelovanje in razvoj (OECD) in Eurostat. Upamo, da bodo številne knjižnice in zlasti vse agencije, ki pripravljajo statistične podatke o knjižnicah na nacionalni ravni v Evropi, te kalkulatorje/kazalnike sprejele v svojo vsakodnevno rutino.

Ključne besede: knjižnična statistika, knjižnični kazalniki, knjižnični izračuni, knjižnični izdatki, knjižnična politika in načrtovanje, Evropa

1 Introduction

This article considers indicators in library statistics and the need for the use of calculators among politicians and policy-makers. Library statistics are normally difficult to collect and to process. Justinić (National and University Library of Croatia) underlines the radical methodological change of ISO (International Organization for Standardization) 2789, where indicators prevail over descriptors and definitions. She points to the importance of making the library community aware that delivering correct, reliable, and comparable data is fundamental to a well-informed decision-making process (Justinić, 2018).

It is strange indeed that, in a time of artificial intelligence (AI) and extensive use of technology, the production of library statistics remains a complex process. While cultural statistics aggregated by Eurostat are relatively complete (Eurostat 2019), library figures are not always collected on an annual basis and do not lend themselves to easy interpretation. Only a few agencies in Europe (Germany, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark) aggregate data extensively at the national level and do it in an accurate manner with annual reports; when data is collected, it is not always widely displayed as public information. Normally, only figures related to (e-)book circulation (acquisition and lending) and the number of visitors are available in every country because this kind of data is processed through automated library systems (Düren et al., 2021; Vitiello, 2024).

Library expenditure is difficult information to collect. Data is scarce and rare, to the point that the simple and straightforward question “How much is the library sector worth in Europe?” cannot be answered. Nevertheless, library expenditure is pivotal in assessing the level of public funding invested in libraries and should inevitably be connected to any form of measurement of library performance.

There are several reasons why library statistics is so difficult to collect and why, among all kinds of data, “library expenditure” is the most difficult category to compile.

1. First, the current production of library statistics is a top-down administrative exercise in which a central entity (a ministry, a library association, the national library) is providing instructions to individual libraries. As Justinić (2018) rightly underlines, the very first problem is to agree on a set of definition and to come to a shared understanding of these definitions.
2. Second, although statistics are determinant for library policy and planning as well as for library management, their process is often seen as an accounting exercise, more useful to decision-makers in ministries than to the improvement of library work.
3. Third, statistical reporting is not always a process closely linked to library operations with data automatically feeding a central system. It is often felt as an additional burden put on library workers – and this increases the distance between compilers and decision-makers.
4. Fourth, statistics are a one-way process in which the general output consists of aggregating data and percentages, and not indicators which are useful to people operating at the input level. In other words, what libraries (the input level) see at the end of the exercise are long columns of figures, and not the extraction of data that could be relevant to them. For instance, a mid-level city of 30,000 to 50,000 inhabitants would like to see library performances

compared with library performances in cities of similar size and features. In order to make cross-library comparisons, indicators are needed.

5. Fifth, with indicators prevailing over descriptors and definitions, an ideal interface for library statistics should allow for cross-country comparison where equalisation mechanisms are used to adjust variables to the different levels of national development – it is unfair, and methodologically incorrect, to compare libraries in Slovenia and libraries in Germany using absolute figures. Two kinds of adjustments are needed. The first is to break down records per inhabitant; the second is to relate figures to per capita gross domestic product (EUROSTAT, 2019). Only after these adjustments – for instance, 2.1 million people in Slovenia against 83.8 million people in Germany, and per capita gross domestic product of € 27,071 in Slovenia against a per capita gross domestic product € 46,264 in Germany – comparison is possible.

These two adjustments conform to those normally adopted by Eurostat and are applied to the series of calculators/indicators related to library expenditure presented in the next chapters.

2 The State of Health of the Library Sector: Three Indicators

During the “decade that shook the library world” (2011–2021), the library sector experienced a deep financial crisis; even now, libraries seem to be caught in the vice of dwindling resources. In two articles (Vitiello, 2024; Vitiello, 2025), I have emphasised the decline of library expenditure in flagship countries – the Nordic countries – and the existence of sharp disparities from one European country to another.

The decline of library expenditure in this paper is evaluated on the basis of three indicators: 1) per capita national gross domestic product; 2) national government expenditure; and 3) expenditure for cultural services. These indicators are applied to sectoral statistics assembled by Eurostat and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, including cultural statistics, and are based on the Classification of the Functions of Government (COFOG) (OECD, 2024; EUROSTAT, 2024a).

The first indicator – library expenditure as per thousand of gross domestic product – assesses the role of libraries in the national community and whether they are considered main actors in the construction of a sustainable, democratic, and equal society. This indicator can ideally be used to assess library expenditure at the national level (but also at the regional and city level), as it shows

whether governments are committed to supporting libraries. Figures related to per capita gross domestic product – national, regional, and municipal – can be easily found online.

The second indicator – library expenditure as per thousand in government expenditure – evaluates how important libraries are in public policy and how relevant they are in the provision of public goods and services. Gross domestic product at the municipal level may be altered by the local presence of a firm, for instance, whose turnover has no impact on the municipal budget. This indicator can be used at the regional/municipal level to assess the relevance of public libraries for local politicians. Municipal or regional budgets are public data; therefore, they are also easily available online.

The third indicator – library expenditure as a percentage of expenditure for cultural services – is more qualitative. It evaluates cultural engagement at the local level and the role played by libraries. In the classification of the functions of government, public expenditure in culture is under the category “Cultural services” (Eurostat, 2018, p. 102). Expenditure for cultural services is itself a sub-division of the chapter “Recreation, culture and religion”. This indicator can be applied both nationwide and locally.

The paragraphs below describing the calculators are divided into two sections. The first section calculates library expenditure in relation to the three (non-library) indicators: as per thousand of the city/region/nation gross domestic product; as per thousand of government expenditure; and as percentage of cultural expenditure. The second section is the indicator itself. It ascertains whether the result provided by the calculator in the first section is more or less than, or in line with, European standards.

On the basis of these methodological considerations, the three indicators are applied within a well-defined spatial and temporal scope to demonstrate how they can be used. Geographically, they concern eight European countries located in different regions of Europe: Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Slovenia, Germany, Spain, and Portugal. Temporally, indicators take into account library expenditure from 2011 to 2022. Library agencies or ministerial departments in these eight countries were selected because they make library statistics widely available online.

2.1 1st Indicator: Library Expenditure as Part of Per Capita Gross Domestic Product

Table 1: General government expenditure on recreation, culture, and religion, 2022 (% of gross domestic product) (Source: Eurostat, 2024a)

	Recreation, culture, and religion	Recreational and sporting services	Cultural services	Broadcasting and publishing services	Religious and other community services	R&D Recreation, culture, and religion	Recreation, culture, and religion n.e.c.
EU	1.1	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0
euro area 19	1.1	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
euro area 20	1.1	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Belgium	1.2	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0
Bulgaria	0.6	0.1	0.4	0.1	0.0	:	
Czechia	1.4	0.5	0.6	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Denmark	1.4	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.4	0.0	0.0
Germany	1.0	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Estonia	1.9	0.5	0.9	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.2
Ireland	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Greece	1.1	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1
Spain	1.2	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0
France	1.4	0.6	0.7	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Croatia	1.6	0.4	0.7	0.3	0.1	0.0	0.0
Italy	0.8	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0
Cyprus	0.7	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0
Latvia	1.3	0.3	0.9	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Lithuania	1.2	0.3	0.7	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Luxembourg	1.2	0.5	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0
Hungary	2.7	0.9	1.1	0.3	0.4	0.0	0.1
Malta	1.4	0.3	0.9	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Netherlands	1.2	0.5	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0
Austria	1.2	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.0	0.0
Poland	1.1	0.4	0.6	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Portugal	0.9	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1
Romania	1.0	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.2
Slovenia	1.5	0.4	0.7	0.3	0.1	0.0	0.1
Slovakia	1.1	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0
Finland	1.4	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0
Sweden	1.3	0.6	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Iceland	3.1	1.5	1.1	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0
Norway	1.3	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1
Switzerland	1.0	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0

Eurostat applies the gross domestic product share indicator to all items included in the chapter of the Classification of the Functions of Government devoted to

“Recreation, culture and religion”. Government expenditure in culture in 2022 is described in Table 1.

Figure 1 shows library expenditure from 2011 to 2022.

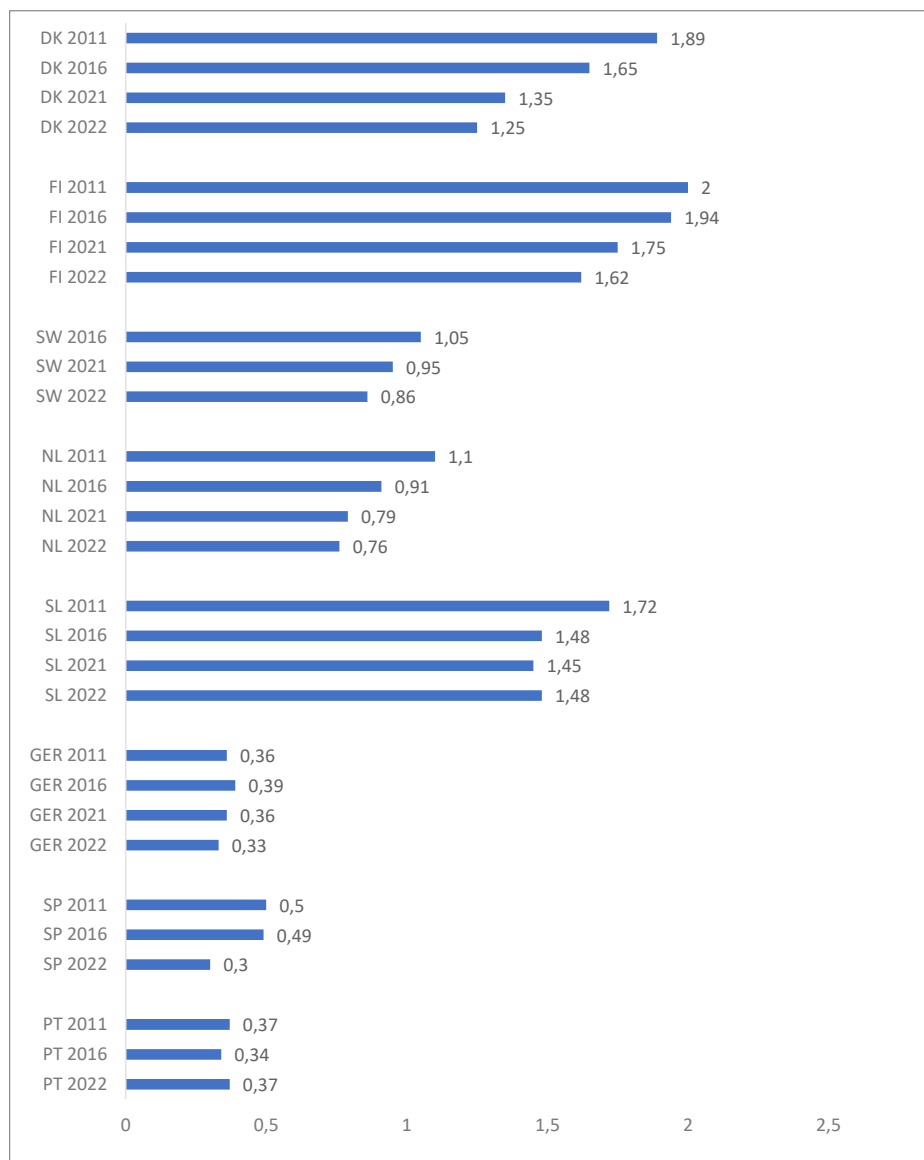


Figure 1: Library expenditure per thousand of gross domestic product (‰) (Source: Vitiello, 2024)

Each of the library values presented in the following chapters are related to the equivalent values of gross domestic product, governmental expenditure, and cultural expenditure in the same years (2011, 2016, 2021, and, when available, 2022). Library expenditure as a share of national gross domestic product is restricted to the eight countries mentioned above. These European countries were selected on the grounds of data quality: library statistics are accurate and are published every year online. In order to make figures more readable, library expenditure is calculated as per thousand, and not as percentage.

In real terms (budget adjusted to inflation), the Danish library expenditure was 1.89‰ of gross domestic product in 2011 and 1.22 ‰ in 2022; the Dutch library budget dropped from 1.1‰ to 0.76‰ – this decrease corresponds to, respectively, -33% and -30% in only ten years. Spanish library expenditure came down from 0.5‰ to 0.3‰ of gross domestic product – a decrease of 40%. The gap between the beginning and the end of the decade was lower in Finland and Sweden (-19%) and in Slovenia (-14%) and almost negligible in Germany and Portugal (respectively, -0.33% and -0.37%).

The area of variation between upper and lower limits on the scale of library expenditure related to 2022 may comply with the following range:

If library expenditure is:

- > 0.9 (‰) of the state (or region, or city) gross domestic product – more than the European average,
- < 0.9 (‰) of the city (region, state) gross domestic product and > 0.6 (‰) – in line with the European average,
- < 0.6 (‰) of the city (region, state) gross domestic product – less than European average (Rete delle Reti, 2025).

Indicators and performance ranges are applied in the calculator developed by Rete delle Reti, a cooperative library agency operating in Italy, which has adopted the Eurostat methodology to compare library expenditure (Figure 2).

This analysis realistically evaluates the level of governmental commitment in supporting libraries. You can use the ranking above with politicians and library decision-makers in your city, region, country, in order to show whether library expenditure is more/less than, or in line with European standards based on eight countries.

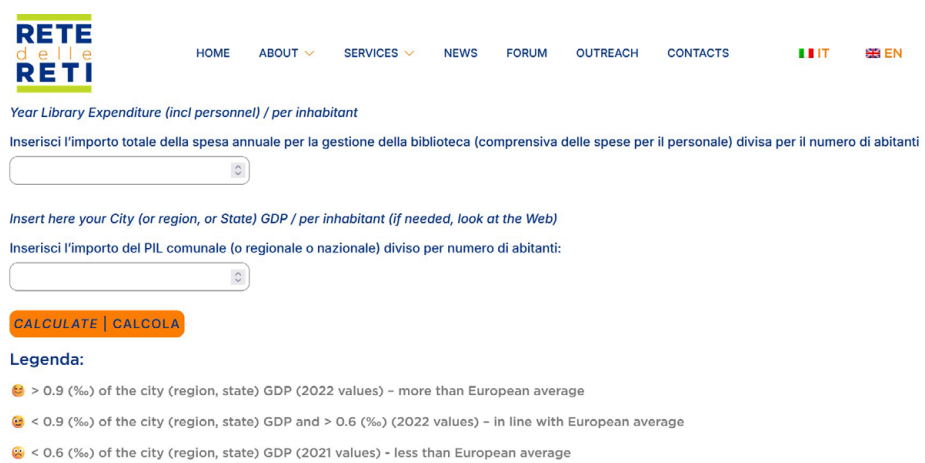


Figure 2: RdR Calculator: Library expenditure per thousand of gross domestic product (‰)

2.2 2nd Indicator: Library Expenditure as a Share of Government Expenditure

This indicator evaluates how important libraries are in public policies and how relevant they are in the provision of public goods and services.

Taking as reference the year 2021, Table 2 applies the indicator to the eight countries under scrutiny. Here again, data is expressed in per thousand and percentage, to facilitate reading. Data is summarised in Figure 3. We can clearly see the largest shares in three countries: Denmark, Finland, and Slovenia, while in other countries the shares are considerably lower.

Table 2: General Government expenditure on cultural services, 2012 and 2017 (Sources: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024; national sources in the Bibliography) (all numbers are in €)

2021	Government expenditure (Ml €)	Library expenditure	Per thousand (‰)
DK (kr)	1 269 114	3 011 850 000	2.3
FIN	139 882	330 935 877	2.3
GE	1 842 603	1 003 596 808	0.5
NL	429 986	543 000 000	1.2
PT	102 503	63 299 600	0.6
SL	25 879	59 957 081	2.3
SP	611 470	413 976 600	0.6
SW (kr)	2 724 406	4 653 724 000	1.7

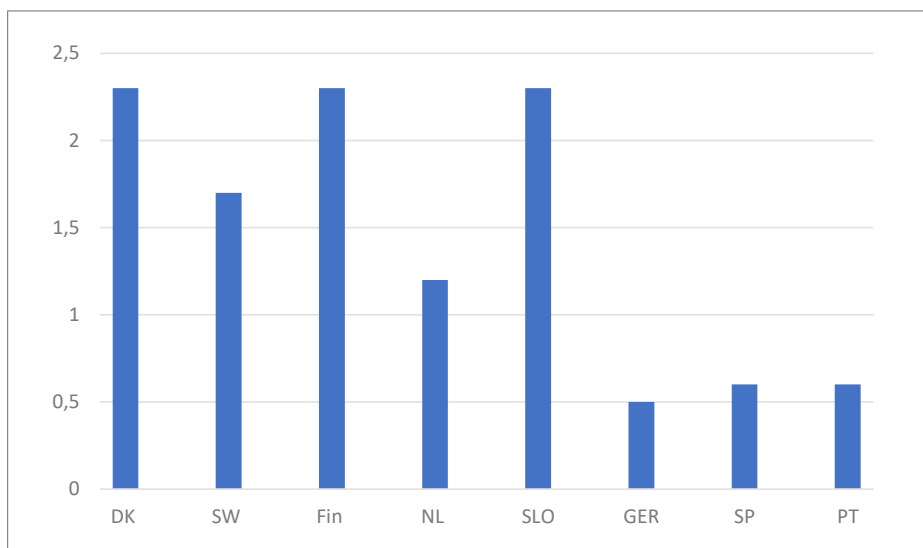


Figure 3: Library expenditure per thousand of government expenditure in 2021

It is important to make a distinction between the first and the second indicator. The first indicator has a general nature and assesses the relevance of libraries in a society. There may be rich societies that do not acknowledge the importance of instruction and culture for the free development of individuals and, conversely, less prosperous societies that entrust libraries with the mission of raising the cultural and educational level of the population. Independently of gross domestic product, this indicator differs from one country to another.

The second indicator is linked to the nature of government expenditure. There may be societies in which public goods and services of a cultural nature are provided through tax collection; in other countries, the role of philanthropic and charity organisations is more relevant. It is the reason why library expenditure as a share of government expenditure may be more appropriate for cities and municipalities. Many resources freely available online include city budgets in detail (for instance, Fondazione Openpolis, 2024; République française, 2024; HaushaltsSteuerung.de, 2024). These data are public and easily accessible.

The area of variation between upper and lower limits on the scale of library expenditure related to 2022 may comply with the following range:

If library expenditure is:

- > 2.0 (‰) of the city (region, state) government expenditure (2021 values) – more than European average,

- < 2.0 (‰) of the city (region, state) government expenditure and > 1.0 (‰) (2021 values) – in line with European average,
- < 1.0 (‰) of the city (region, state) government expenditure (2021 values) – less than European average.

This indicator is applied in the calculator described in Figure 4, also developed by Rete delle Reti (Rete delle Reti, 2025).

The screenshot shows the 'RETE delle RETI' logo on the left and a navigation menu (HOME, ABOUT, SERVICES, NEWS, FORUM, OUTREACH, CONTACTS) on the right. Below the logo, the text 'Year Library Expenditure (incl personnel) / per inhabitant' is followed by a description in Italian: 'Inserisci l'importo totale della spesa annuale per la gestione della biblioteca (comprensiva delle spese per il personale) divisa per il numero di abitanti'. A text input field is provided. Below this, the text 'City (or region, or State) Government expenditure / per inhabitant' is followed by another description in Italian: 'Inserisci l'importo totale della spesa municipale (o regionale o nazionale) divisa per numero di abitanti:'. A second text input field is provided. An orange button labeled 'CALCULATE | CALCOLA' is below the fields. A 'Legenda:' section follows, with three items: a green circle for '> 2.0 (‰) of the city (region, state) Government expenditure (2021 values) - more than European average', a yellow circle for '< 1.9 (‰) of the city (region, state) Government expenditure and > 1.1 (‰) (2021 values) - In line with European average', and a red circle for '< 1.0 (‰) of the city (region, state) Government expenditure (2021 values) - less than European average'.

Figure 4: RdR calculator: Library expenditure as a share of government expenditure (‰)

2.3 3rd Indicator: Library Expenditure as a Share of Cultural Expenditure

In Europe public libraries are unquestionably part of the cultural infrastructure of a country. According to the Classification of the Functions of Government (COFOG), library expenditure is the sub-category 08.2 of Chapter 8 “Recreation, culture and religion”. Cultural services include “the supervision, regulation, operation and support of cultural facilities (libraries, museums, art galleries, theatres, exhibition halls, monuments, historic houses and sites, zoological and botanical gardens, aquaria, arboreta, etc.)” (Eurostat, 2019, p. 102). In Figure 5, library expenditure is expressed as a fraction of cultural expenditure. This data shows to what extent, at least in some countries, the role of public libraries among cultural offerings has decreased in the last decade.

Further evidence can be found in tracking down parallel trends in the evolution of national gross domestic product, cultural expenditure, and library expenditure. In Figure 6, data related to national economic development (per capita gross domestic product), expenditure on cultural services, and library

expenditure are compared in order to analyse the interaction between the three variants and their variations in relation to the year 2011.

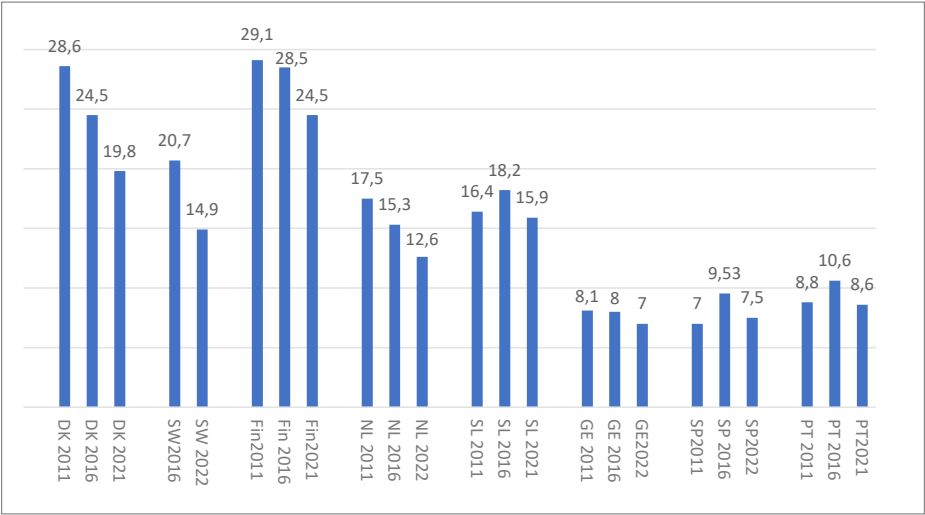


Figure 5: Library expenditure as a percentage of expenditure in cultural services (Source: Vitiello, 2025)

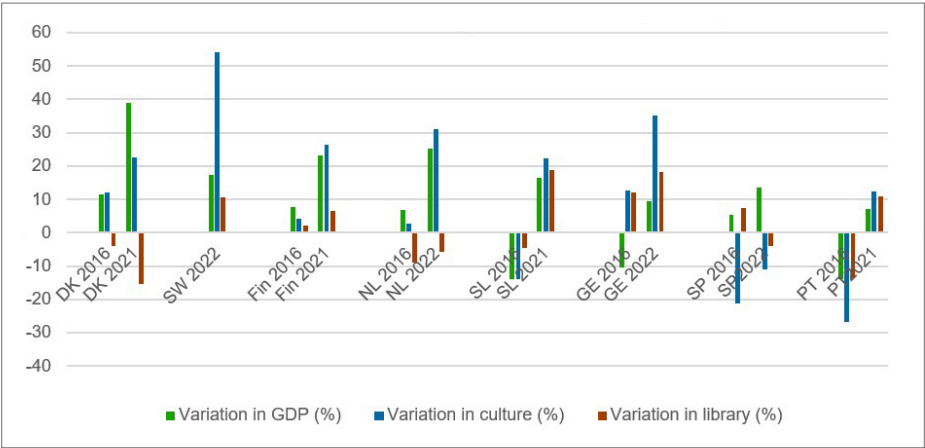


Figure 6: Gross domestic product per capita, cultural/library expenditure (2011–2021) – negative/positive variations (2011–2021; Sweden, 2016–2022) (Source: Vitiello, 2025)

It is easy to infer that the investment in Spanish libraries was still significant when Spain was in full recession (2011 to 2016) and collapsed in the years between 2017 and 2021, in line with parallel reductions in cultural expenditure.

Germany, Slovenia, and Portugal show percentage variations in library expenditure that are aligned to variations in cultural expenditure, with the remarkable case of Germany having positive values both in culture and in libraries even in years when the national gross domestic product per capita diminished (2011 to 2016). In Sweden and Finland, instead, library expenditure grew at a much slower pace than their respective national gross domestic products and cultural expenditure. In Denmark and the Netherlands, library expenditure plummeted from 2011 to 2021; in the same time frame, instead, national gross domestic products and cultural expenditure in the two countries were making great strides.

The area of variation between upper and lower limits on the scale of library expenditure related to 2022 may comply with the following range:

If library expenditure is:

- > 20% of the city (region, state) cultural expenditure – more than European average;
- < 20% of the city (region, state) cultural expenditure and > 12 (‰) – in line with European average;
- < 12% of the city (region, state) cultural expenditure – less than European average.

This indicator is applied in the calculator presented in Figure 7, developed by Rete delle Reti, which refers to the year 2022, or 2021 if the 2022 data is not available (Rete delle Reti, 2025).

The screenshot shows the 'Rete delle Reti' logo on the left and a navigation menu with links: HOME, ABOUT, SERVICES, NEWS, FORUM, OUTREACH, and CONTACTS. On the right, there are flags for IT (Italy) and EN (English). Below the navigation bar, there are two input fields for calculating the indicator. The first field is labeled 'Insert the year Library Expenditure (incl personnel) / per inhabitant' and the second is labeled 'Insert here your city (or region, or State) Cultural expenditure / per inhabitant'. Both fields have a small 'x' icon in the bottom right corner. Below the input fields, there is an orange button labeled 'CALCULATE | CALCOLA'. At the bottom, there is a 'Legenda:' section with three items: '20% as a % of cultural expenditure – your city spends more than European average', '< 20% and > 12% as a % of cultural expenditure (2022 values) – your city is in line with European average', and '< 12% as a % of cultural expenditure (2022 values) – your city spends less than European average'.

Figure 7: RdR calculator: Library expenditure as a share of cultural expenditure (in %)

This calculator is more qualitative and evaluates the role played by libraries in the more general cultural sphere. Practitioners may also use this calculator to show politicians and policy-makers how libraries and culture are taken into consideration in a given city (or region, or state).

3 Conclusions: The Role of Exogenous Indicators

The combination of calculators and indicators is certainly no solution to the complex problem of collecting library statistics, nor is it a magic formula that allows libraries to advocate for increased budgets. Calculators combined with indicators, however, may help to see statistics from a different perspective – not as an accounting issue, but as a decentralised exercise close to the operational level of libraries. Through percentage calculations and thanks to the indicators set by Rete delle Reti, each European library has the tools to compare its level of expenditure with that of libraries located in countries with gross domestic products. The Rete delle Reti calculators are AI-based and assess, objectively and in a gamified manner, governmental commitment to supporting libraries.

Calculators were tested with a set of public libraries. After the test, the calculator “Library expenditure as a share of government expenditure” was added as a way to compare library expenditure to the city budget, rather than to the local gross domestic product. If all calculators were to be combined with a database, they would also facilitate longitudinal information to detect long-term trends. A more extensive implementation of artificial intelligence tools would also allow one to fine-tune indicators and to increase the level of accuracy in the future. Calculators address the needs of decision-makers and help popularise the idea of library statistics among professionals.

It is important, however, to combine endogenous (to libraries) and exogenous indicators to assess library activities in relation to their environment. Along with economic and demographic data, the social indicators proposed by the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development should also be applied.

In Europe sustainable development indicators are maintained by the Social Scoreboard that supports the European Pillar of Social Rights (Eurostat, 2024b). Some of them – for example, “Early dropout from education and training”, “People with overall basic or above basic digital skills”, “Young people neither employed nor in education and training (NEET)”, “Gender employment gap”, “At-risk rate of poverty or social exclusion”, and “At-risk rate of poverty or exclusion of children” – are certainly relevant to libraries and useful for a comparative

and a contextualised analysis of library services in different countries, regions, and cities.

It is therefore to be hoped that many libraries and, in particular, all agencies producing library statistics at the national level in Europe will adopt similar calculators/indicators in their daily processes.

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