Libraries, literacy and poverty reduction:

a key to African development

by Professor Kingo Mchombu, University of Namibia

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A research paper looking at libraries in Africa.

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Contents

Foreword: The context

The role that libraries in Africa could play in reducing poverty has not been sufficiently recognised and hence the necessary policy developments and investment in the library network have not yet been made. Policy makers and donors, recognising the link between poverty reduction and literacy, have given centre stage to textbooks in policies to increase literacy and student achievement levels. Yet textbooks are the beginning of the solution, not the complete answer. Libraries sustain literacy and do so on a reuse basis providing a cost-effective means of support for a whole community of readers who seek information for tackling their own problems. This paper, written by a respected and experienced African educator and librarian, points the way ahead for Africa with affordable and achievable library strategies to enable the poorest communities to participate in their own development.

Sara Harrity MBE, Book Aid International, October 2006

Introducing Book Aid International

While the West manufactures and ingests a glut of information every day the vast majority of Africans subsist on very little. Media is underdeveloped, internet access is limited to a privileged few and the most basic tools of literacy and learning, in the form of books, must often be shared between six or more pupils. Few schools have a school library and an under-developed local publishing sector produces books that only a middle class minority can afford. Meanwhile library services lack the budget to stock their shelves or indeed to provide services to reach all the poor communities that they would hope to serve.

Book Aid International is an international development charity which has worked to create opportunities for information access for more than 50 years. We are advocating for greater support for school and community libraries, both by international aid donors and African governments. This is fundamental to the delivery of quality education for all the world's poor. Only when people have access to adequate reading materials can they hope to gain and maintain literacy skills for life.

Knowledge and development

Reducing poverty and optimising human development require more than simply raising national incomes. They involve people being able to realise those basic capabilities that enable them to develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) outline four basic capabilities for human development:

- to lead long and healthy lives
- to be knowledgeable
- to have access to adequate resources needed for a decent standard of living
- to be able to participate in the life of the community (UNDP 2006).

Of these capabilities, our particular concern in this paper is to look at knowledge, although our approach takes in the ways in which enhancing the knowledge of individuals also creates opportunities for better realising the other three capabilities. For instance, better knowledge gives people more opportunities for improved health, through enabling people to understand and employ preventative strategies and more effectively use treatments, and also through simply being aware of health services that are available to them. Similarly knowledge also affords opportunities to improve income generation and to enhance interaction with the community.

The first area of knowledge that we look at is literacy. This skill underpins learning in all other areas and is one of the key indicators used by UNDP for measuring human development. The second dimension to our study is about enabling communities to access information that is useful and relevant. This enhances knowledge because people become able to understand their environment better, to learn new skills and to make more informed decisions about their lives. The poorest and most vulnerable people need access to reliable information so that during difficult times they can opt for the best survival strategy, which will enable them and their families to keep going even during times of extreme hardship. New knowledge and skills are also crucial assets that can improve a household's income-generating capability and reduce vulnerability to shocks, such as economic downturn, loss of employment or the illness of a wage-earning family member.

This paper examines the role of libraries in relation to these two areas of knowledge. Libraries play an important role in the acquisition, maintenance and development of literacy skills. They achieve this through offering access to reading materials that are relevant, stimulating, enjoyable or useful. Pleasure in reading, which in turn helps to foster a lifelong reading habit, is often experienced in the library in which readers gain their first opportunity to pick a book of their own choice. Libraries are also important for providing practical information that can be used to facilitate development, whether for seeking employment, understanding rights, learning a skill, checking a fact or gaining health information.

The knowledge divide

Information and knowledge are now crucial assets in the global economy. Nations are creating strategies to ensure that information and knowledge are used effectively, shared and made accessible. Such strategies consider information and knowledge at all levels, from scientific discoveries and business information, through to civic engagement and education for all. Much of this is driven by the desire not to lose out or fall behind in the process of ICT advances. In a speech in 2000, Tony Blair spoke of the transformation of the economy through information technology, noting that "in this new environment the most important commodities of a nation are information and knowledge" (Blair 2000).

ICT advances have now exacerbated the global information divide between the developed and the developing world: this puts Africa at a serious disadvantage. Digital information and communication technologies, and new ways of thinking on knowledge management, have revolutionised the ways in which knowledge and technical know-how move around the world. This proliferation of access to information has resulted in a widening gap between rich and poor countries – it is a problem highlighted both by the UNDP Human Development Reports (UNDP 1999 and 2001) and by the leaders of the G8, who at their 2000 summit issued a Charter on the Global Information Society, including special initiatives to bridge the "Digital Divide" (Correia 2002). We know that this gap is growing: World Bank data for 2004 reports that 63 per cent of people in the US are now internet users compared to less than 2 per cent in sub Saharan Africa.

In this information age there is now more than ever a need to equip people with the skills and means to become information-literate and to enable them to locate, access and evaluate information. This is the basis for enabling people to participate as active citizens since they need to be able to make informed choices and decisions and to act on them. Part of this process involves a recognition by policy makers that an information divide between the information rich and the information poor exists and that this is often self-reinforcing. Those people who currently have poor access to information will become further marginalised once basic computer and information literacy skills turn out to be more and more important for economic success and personal advancement (Correia 2002). It is vital that policy measures are put in place to counteract such possibilities.

This global development of knowledge-based societies condemns those without access to relevant information to a life of poverty, and poverty that is steadily increasing in relative terms.

Governments, aid donors and development agencies have a responsibility to counteract information shortages and illiteracy, to empower people to act as agents of their own development: Our joint goal should be to enable all people to have the opportunity to realise their knowledge potential through gaining literacy and relevant information. In its World Development Report 1998/99 the World Bank emphasises the importance of knowledge in combating poverty and states that "As people grasp the ways in which knowledge can improve their lives, they are encouraged to seek out new knowledge and become agents of change themselves" (World Bank 1999).

In today's global information society, non-literate people are at a permanent disadvantage – unsure of their rights, unable to fulfil their potential and unable to play a full part in society. They are disempowered. Literacy is a right and a capability that is fundamental to overcoming poverty.

Yet today it is a right that is denied to nearly a fifth of the world's adult population, most of whom are women. The 2006 Education For All Global Monitoring Report *Literacy for Life* calls for a three pronged policy approach to literacy, encompassing the achievement of Universal Primary Education, the scaling up of youth and adult learning programmes and the development and enrichment of literate environments. Literate societies need to be developed in which all individuals can benefit from rich literate environments. Policies to develop the literate environment can include support for libraries, local language newspapers, book publishing, access of adults to school libraries and radio listening groups. (UNESCO 2006)

Lack of investment in literate environments is currently one of the major shortcomings in efforts to achieve universal literacy. To create literate environments, people need to be surrounded by accessible written information, for learning, research, skills development, leisure or immediate practical purposes. Strong literate environments are underpinned by thriving local publishing, bookselling and media industries, which help to ensure people can get hold of locally relevant materials, including local languages, and local information that reflects local culture, traditions and needs. For people living in poverty, it is crucial to have access to such materials – and this is where public libraries have an important role to play, with their mandate of free and universal access.

Both public libraries and school libraries have a vital function in supporting learners to acquire, maintain and develop their literacy. Yet most poor communities in Africa do not have access to a library and those that do exist are almost always poorly resourced. This damages educational outcomes for many. The report on the availability of books and learning materials in Africa produced for the 2000 Education For All assessment commented that, "As the decade came to a close, school libraries were said to have the lowest of priorities in educational spending. The majority of schools possessed no library. Where some semblance of a school library did exist, it was often no more than a few shelves of outdated and worn out material, inadequately staffed." (Montagnes, 2001).

Poor quality education and shortages of reading materials condemn many children to finishing basic education with very limited literacy skills. A 1995-1998 study by the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) measured primary school students' reading literacy against standards established by national reading experts and sixth grade teachers. In four out of seven countries, fewer than half the sixth graders achieved minimum competence in reading. This study was compared with another by SACMEQ two years later, which saw literacy scores falling even further in five out of six countries (UNESCO 2005). Effectively this means that a significant number of children are completing school to all intents and purposes functionally

illiterate. In Guinea, Niger, Burkina Faso and Uganda this is true for a majority of the children at the end of grade 6 (Abadzi 2004).

In sub Saharan Africa adult literacy levels are now 61% (UNDP 2005). But without regular use literacy skills can be lost within a few years. A large percentage of participants in adult literacy programmes lapse into illiteracy within just a few years if they don't have access to follow up support and appropriate reading materials (Abadzi 2004). The Association for Literacy in Zimbabwe finds that most of their adult illiterates are lapsed literates rather than people with no educational background. Unless literate environments are created which can sustain literacy for life, then education investments will not deliver the lasting benefits required to change lives and reduce poverty.

National education policies need to draw up a framework for both acquiring and maintaining literacy after formal education has ceased. In the framework, library services both in schools and in the community have a crucial role to play.

Knowledge and information for development

Literacy provides critical foundations for development through enabling people to understand written text and to communicate through writing. Yet its uses are limited if people are not then given the chance to access adequate information and to fulfil their learning potential, engage with the democratic process, and learn skills that can enhance their lives and livelihoods.

Development information, in particular, can enable people to fight poverty, deprivation and illiteracy. Rural and urban poor communities are better able to tackle problems and introduce social change if they can get information relevant to their needs and interests. They can adopt new ideas in development with confidence and a better chance of success – if the information has been carefully captured, organised and targeted.

The process of adopting new ideas can be sped up through the participation and involvement of the urban and rural poor. People need both technical knowledge and awareness-raising information closely linked to the problems they face in society. The process of internalising and reflecting on new information and comparing it with that which they already know is an empowering experience.

Establishing library and information centres dedicated to supporting literacy acquisition and poverty eradication, has been one way of ensuring that the rural and urban poor have access to affordable development information. The key is to present information in such a way that people can use it to transform their communities and address other challenges of development they face.

Several experts have grouped the information required to fight poverty and illiteracy into two categories:
- survival information, which is related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, political rights, etc

- citizen action information, which is needed for effective participation as individuals or members of a group in the social, political, legal and economic process (Bunch 1982, Muela-Meza 2005).

There are several key development information needs that if answered could help to bring about major improvements in peoples' standard of living:
- sanitation and hygiene
- clean drinking water
- nutrition and childcare
- appropriate technologies
- environment management and sustainable use of natural resources
- family planning and the functioning of the human body
- primary health care including HIV/AIDS and malaria prevention
- income generation
- food production and information about markets (Pradervand 1980; Aboyade 1987; Mchombu 1993).

The challenges faced by libraries and information centres in Africa

This section looks at the ways in which public libraries in Africa are actually working and identifies some of the key challenges they face. The findings in this section of the report are based on a special survey from library networks in five African nations: Malawi, Uganda, Somaliland, Tanzania and Kenya.

Is there sufficient access to libraries?

One of the most significant challenges facing library services in reaching the poor comes from the very limited coverage of most of the library services surveyed. Because of lack of government investment they are unable to achieve anything like full coverage of the population. For instance, Kenya, with its population of 32 million and large literate population of over 15 million, has only 36 public libraries. Malawi has 10, and Uganda 30. Most library service points are located in urban areas where population is highly concentrated and there are few branches in rural areas where a greater proportion of the population live in dispersed settlements.

A key challenge for library services is prioritising their limited resources on meeting the needs of the poorest. Community library projects are a popular strategy to address this challenge and they have been established in several African nations. In Malawi, the National Library Service is attempting to meet this challenge through its Extra-Mural Services Department, which works to set up libraries and information centres in rural schools and communities. So far the Library Service has established 200 community library centres, as well as providing resources for 900 schools. Meanwhile, in Kenya, 21 libraries were established when the local communities provided a building and equipment, while the library service provided training and books.

Are the materials in libraries relevant to their communities?

In order for libraries to function effectively they depend on a good information environment, with access to appropriate resources. An important aspect of this is a thriving local book trade and media industry, which can help to ensure that people can access locally relevant information, including books and other reading materials in local languages.

With lower levels of literacy, particularly amongst poorer groups and those in rural areas, great care is needed to provide appropriate information resources for all members of the community. It is vital that potential library users are not alienated by libraries which only contain material that is too detailed, too advanced or simply irrelevant to their needs.

Survey respondents felt that library book collections should be supplemented with basic pamphlets and audio-visual materials for easy transfer of information to a semi-literate community. Unfortunately, many libraries report severe financial constraints, which prevent them from obtaining or producing basic local materials. This problem is exacerbated by the underdeveloped publishing industry in many African nations, which is

largely focused on the publication of school textbooks and has limited capacity or resource to produce development information materials or books in local languages.

Libraries can also benefit by strengthening links with local agencies engaged in literacy promotion and development, such as agricultural extension workers and health information projects. In Uganda, the National Library seek to make use of materials produced in this way. They give the following example:
"In Nakaseke, 60 km from Kampala, a farmers group is one of the main groups that use the library and some of the National Agricultural Advisory Services materials have been placed in the library for use by the group. Information for this group is also broadcast on the local radio station located at the telecentre."
This approach combines multimedia delivery of information and close collaboration with extension agencies in order to avoid duplication of effort. Other libraries felt that they could devise better strategies to acquire development information and basic literacy materials. In Malawi meanwhile, the library staff are working on repackaging and design of information materials to fill these gaps.

All survey respondents wanted systematic information needs assessments to be undertaken to identify the services needed to reduce poverty and promote literacy. None has yet had the opportunity to undertake work of this nature on a nationwide scale. However, a growing trend for analysis and research is emerging, often beginning with locally-driven initiatives. In Kenya, a pilot community profiling exercise is taking place in Coast Province, and there are plans to roll this out across the country. Malawi are also working to involve beneficiaries in discussions about selecting reading materials. Several respondents recognised the need for consultation and participatory studies so that communities' needs can be fully understood from their own perspective.

A shift to providing more relevant materials requires not only restocking of the library but also a retraining of staff to enable them to become development workers. A respondent from Kenya noted that many colleagues "are not aware that the information needs of those in rural areas cannot be served by the traditional library. This calls for a major paradigm shift on the part of library staff…The ideal candidate should be persons who come from the community and they should not be passive mediators of published sources but should participate in the creation of information resources."

Are information agencies working together effectively in partnerships?

The sheer proliferation of agencies involved in development and development information can often be in itself a major difficulty. Better government co-ordination could help agencies throughout the sector and allow libraries to disseminate and promote information better to disadvantaged groups. In many countries a great deal of investment goes into producing and disseminating development information, but no one has "a bird's eye view" of what is on the ground. National information strategies are needed to ensure that effective collaboration can occur. With some co-ordination, services could be consolidated to provide the rural and urban poor with "one stop" information services answering their needs.

Partnership arrangements with NGOs and government departments are an important way for libraries to make the most of opportunities to promote literacy and development information. Tanzania Library Services Board provide the example of traditional library services which are assisting NGOs to start their own libraries. Both Malawi and Uganda have functioning partnership arrangements with NGOs and government departments in place for the delivery of development information. Malawi also reported that they have recently established women's reading clubs in several libraries which, at the request of their members, will be providing reading books on development themes and lectures from development practitioners, including information on income-generating activities. These initiatives are still on a small scale, but do give the Malawi public library system an opportunity to learn how to do things differently. A further significant development in Malawi is the anticipated establishment of the Malawi Centre for Development Information at the Malawi National Library funded by the World Bank. The centre will offer both print and electronic development information, while providing a platform for professional groups and media practitioners to participate in discussions on development issues.

Another challenge for the libraries will be to offer a broader range of services for those community members with limited or new literacy skills. One strategy is to utilise partnerships with other organisations to offer training, presentations and discussion forums for library users. The Uganda survey response noted that four libraries (Buikwe, Kyabutaika, Nakaseke and Katengesa) have established collaborative arrangements with NGOs and groups to provide economic empowerment information and other community-led information-sharing activities using the library as their platform. Such initiatives are important first steps towards optimising partnership between libraries and their beneficiary communities. Really effective partnerships will happen when all sections of society are able to request and receive the information they need, while at the same time libraries are equipped to record and disseminate communities' local knowledge.

Is there real government support for libraries and information?

Government support is vital if African nations are to be successful in securing community access to information and in creating literate environments to support lifelong literacy. However, libraries are rarely mentioned in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers or, indeed, in education strategies or other key policy documents. Frequently they get the lowest priority in public expenditure and their role in creating and sustaining a knowledge society has been seriously underestimated. This is in stark contrast to information policy in the UK, where the government made library information provision a lynchpin of its information strategy through the creation of the People's Network allowing free public access to the internet through public library branches nationwide.

Uganda is one rare example of a national library that has succeeded in gaining policy recognition for its activities and acknowledgement of the ways in which it supports development and poverty alleviation. The Ugandan government's Social Investment Development Plan has a community mobilisation and empowerment programme which states that:

"access to information is also critical for stimulating behaviour change and empowerment of the poor and vulnerable…empowered communities make better use of education, health and agricultural extension services…the capacity of the National Library will be strengthened to achieve effective co-ordination of library and information services, optimal utilisation and sharing of library and information resources and information referral services. Library services will be expanded through the community library and telecentres programme especially in rural areas" (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development 2003)

The Ugandan government's support for increased provision of community information has also caught on at the local level. A variety of outlets are giving development information, including radio, resource centres, public health information, water and sanitation, and adult literacy services.

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Towards a model library: selected case studies

The examples from the library networks in five countries in Africa cited above illustrate the ways they are working to rise to the considerable challenges they face. The three case studies that follow show how information services are able to involve and respond to the communities they serve. Enabling public library networks to address the issues of literacy and poverty reduction will require employing learning from these models of good practice.

Chiwamba information resource centre, Malawi

Summary: The Chiwamba Community Information Centre in rural Malawi is managed by a local committee and operated by a trained Information Assistant. Chiwamba runs a wide range of services for the community and makes use of two-way information flows so that external information and local knowledge are shared. One of Chiwamba's main services is providing reading materials, including formal educational materials and locally produced information pamphlets on agriculture, health and literacy, for example. The Centre is also a location for skills training, with events on topics like starting small businesses, agriculture or health. Meetings, free video shows, and radio listening groups are convened regularly at the Centre.

The Chiwamba community is a cluster of small villages 45 kilometres east of Lilongwe, Malawi's capital city. The Community Information Centre was established after a study of the community's development information needs and the kind of information it habitually sought. Two studies supported by International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada were carried out in Southern Africa between 1990 and 2002 (Mchombu 1993, 2003) to identify information needs of rural communities on rural development and social issues.

The community expressed various needs for development information:
- information on income generation (projects, non-farm incomes, and money-saving initiatives)
- community leadership and social organisation
- literacy support
- soil conservation, soil fertility restoration, and soil erosion control
- agriculture – tobacco, modern farming, local and international markets
- health and sanitation (hygienic handling of local alcohol brews, malaria prevention, hookworms prevention, etc) (Mchombu 1993).

The Chiwamba Community Information Centre designed an information dissemination strategy based on the needs and behaviour of the community as a collaborative project between the Malawi National Library Services and the Chiwamba community under the sponsorship of the IDRC. The development information activities started in 1993. The following information services were offered:

- Reading and borrowing of materials: the most popular materials included newspapers and materials on formal education, income generation, adult literacy, and entertainment.
- Video shows offering development information, publicised via community notice-boards, were shown using a solar powered generator and became a popular activity at the centre.
- A community newsletter was also used for sharing information, and was distributed in strategic locations such as churches, market places and health centres.
- Literacy classes were held in the information centre and graduation events became opportunities to invite everyone in the community to come and celebrate.
- Talks and meetings: agriculture, community development and health workers were regularly invited to give talks at the information centre on topics identified by the community or suggested by the extension worker.
- Games and cultural activities: The information centre has several huts surrounding it which are used for games and cultural activities, including the traditional chess "bawo". Drama, youth and women's clubs were created to help fill the lack of recreational and entertainment facilities in rural communities, especially for young people but also for members of older generations.

An evaluation was carried out at the end of the first phase of the project to measure the impact of development information exchanges (Mchombu 2003). The evaluation attempted to establish ways by which members of the community have benefited from the development information strategy. In the area of health, 33% of those interviewed said the health information had raised their awareness of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, family planning, hygiene and sanitation, and maternal and child care. In the area of agriculture, 29% of those interviewed said the agriculture information received helped improve farming techniques, including better application of fertilizer and manure, improved livestock breeding, employing new crop rotation methods and created better understanding of deforestation, crop diseases, and soil erosion.

In the area of education and literacy, 25% of those interviewed said they had used information on this subject, to achieve the following: supporting and maintaining literacy skills, curriculum related books for reference and study purposes, better understanding of the need to keep children in school (especially girls who were often given away in early marriages). Other community members talked about the way the school books had served as a substitute for unqualified teachers, because children could now read the subject for themselves. Interviewees also mentioned that reading had built their general knowledge base and improved their awareness of current events happening elsewhere in their country and other parts of the world.

An interesting request from some of those interviewed was for a few practical and simple manuals. The example quoted as a model was the book *Where there is no doctor* which offers simple language and clear explanations, including diagrams, on a wide range of health prevention, education and treatment topics.

Overall many people in Chiwamba community expressed the view that the community information strategy had strengthened the community information and learning environment, enhanced learning techniques for school and literacy learners, and increased respect for Malawian culture through discussions and reflections on their own culture and traditions (Mchombu 2003). The Chiwamba project has been taken over by the Malawi National Library Service and the Chiwamba Community since the funding from IDRC ended.

Bibliotecas Rurales and Acku Quinde, Cajamarca, Peru

Summary: The Peruvian libraries network, Bibliotecas Rurales, is an educational and cultural movement incorporating literacy activities, local language publications, reading and learning. The organisation encourages reading and in particular the practical application of what has been read. This is important in a context where reading is a shared process of social interaction and reflection and not merely a solitary activity. The organisation takes a community-led approach with elected leadership and their 600 libraries are usually located in homes and staffed by volunteers.

Cajamarca is one of the poorest districts of Peru and has an estimated population of over 1.3 million people. 80% of the people live in the countryside. The network of rural libraries was initiated in 1971 by Father John Medcalf, a British priest who has worked in Peru for many years (Ortiz 1996).

The network of over 600 rural libraries supports the rural people of Cajamarca who are involved in the reinstatement, revitalisation and reinforcement of Andean indigenous knowledge base. The network is implemented through a diverse range of educational projects aimed at literates, semi-literates and those who have relapsed into illiteracy. The goal is to promote reading and the practical application of what is read (Ortiz 1996, Genesse 1996).

The network of rural libraries was formed with a combination of cultural and learning objectives. Community members wanted to learn more about their culture and ensure that it thrives, and to produce reading materials based on the indigenous knowledge of the Andes. They hoped to reduce both illiteracy and relapse into illiteracy, to stimulate the formation of reading groups, and offer information and empowerment to readers (Ortiz 1996).

The Bibliotecas Rurales network is based on the principle of popular participation and people empowerment. Elected committees are formed, with representatives of readers, librarians and co-ordinators. Workshops are held every six months to formulate policy and make programme decisions for the network (Ortiz 1996).

The Bibliotecas Rurales network has an extensive literacy and cultural promotion foundation, through a specialised unit called Acku Quinde. Villagers in an area from which local knowledge has been drawn form a cultural organisation to ensure that the new spirit of learning does not fade away.

The network does not view oral culture as an obstacle to the development of reading habits and so the approach of the network is to strengthen oral culture. The reading method of the Cajamarca communities is that of a social activity which involves reading a few pages and then discussing what has been read with others, in order to jointly assess how to apply the ideas in the local environment. The belief is that the relationship between the reader and the book does not have to be individualistic, but should be rooted in the culture and environment of the Andes people as an integrative socio-cultural process (Genesse 1996).

The Acku Quinde section of the network is also responsible for publications production. Extensive participation is used to identify what should be published, based on existing shortages of reading materials. This also gives the communities an opportunity to reclaim and share their knowledge, consolidate the collective memory of the Andean people, and reaffirm their identity and dignity. Publications so far include a multi-volume rural encyclopaedia titled *Enciclopedia Campesina.* Through extensive research in the local community, it has been possible to collect materials for many other publications. The series of publications now has more than 25 titles (Ortiz 1996).

The library services are run by volunteers, often as small units based in households rather than in a conventional library. The rural libraries are then used as a mobilisation tool to stimulate and steer the overall development of the community. The development and empowering role of rural libraries is the over-riding philosophy. As one reader is quoted as saying "now, not only do we read books, but we write them too" (Genesse 1996)

Illubabor Community Library and Information Centres, Ethiopia

Summary: The Illubabor community library and information centres in rural Ethiopia have sought to enhance development and reduce poverty in the region through providing much needed information, particularly in the areas of agriculture and health. Their participatory approach aims to strengthen civil society by enhancing literacy and recording local culture and knowledge through facilitating publication of locally produced pamphlets and materials. Ethiopia's small publishing industry is largely geared towards a school textbook market and therefore does not answer all the information needs of the centres' users.

The Illubabor project sought to revitalise twelve slightly dilapidated government reading rooms in rural Ethiopia and transform them into community library and information centres. The centres are based in a Western region of Ethiopia near the border with Sudan. The programme was developed by the local Illubabor community with support from Oxfam Canada as part of a broader strategy of capacity building, focusing on community empowerment, popular participation, and the encouragement of ordinary people to take ownership of the development process. The people of Illubabor are poor but their area has fertile agricultural land. They grow maize, teff, sorghum, barley, wheat,

pulses, and coffee. Among the challenges facing the community are soil erosion, environmental degradation, low price of coffee and high illiteracy rates.

The partnership between Oxfam and the Illubabor community is aimed at harnessing information and knowledge to support community development. The specific objectives were to:

- Increase the use of new information and knowledge to help rural people manage social changes, improve their agricultural production, and learn better health practices to protect themselves and their families from disease;
- Nurture the ability of people to innovate and spread the innovations locally;
- Support rural people to become increasingly independent and regain their dignity;
- Increase the capabilities of rural people to identify, evaluate and use their deep and rich indigenous knowledge that had become marginalised (Tadesse and Genesse 2002, Mchombu 2004).

The community library and information resource centres were interlinked with social development problems facing the community, and a grassroots based organisation was created to run the information centres, called the Library Management Committees (LMCs). These determined an approach based around building the skills capacities of key players, creating a vibrant civil society around the information centres, diversifying services to cater for all members of the community and progressively introducing information and communication technologies (Tadesse and Genesse 2002).

Oxfam adopted the role of facilitator and mentor, guiding the LMCs to identify their own problems and design and control their own development. With funding from the Horn of Africa Capacity Building Program (HOACBP) capacity building support was offered. The first area of training equipped LMC representatives with skills to negotiate with the public networks, the private sector and government officials. Training was then provided to support the diversification of the library information resources to different groups within the community, including the semi-literate. Training included an exploration of the role of information and knowledge for development, moving on from the previous role of the reading room which had primarily served teachers and students for reference and homework purposes. This capacity building enabled the LMCs to use information to tackle pressing social problems such as family planning, HIV/AIDS, food security, broad socio-economic development as well as the need to incorporate indigenous knowledge and local culture in the emerging information system. The handbook, *Sharing Knowledge for Community Development and Transformation* (Mchombu 2004) was one of the products of this stage of capacity building.

To appeal to a broader readership and embrace local culture, materials were published in the local language, Oromifa. This aspect of the programme supported writing and publishing skills development, writing contests in Oromifa and dissemination of development information in Oromifa. To ensure the project's sustainability, support was also provided to develop resource mobilisation strategies such as planting trees, selling tea and coffee in the information resource centres and charging fees for watching videos and soccer.

The Illubabor community information resource centres tells the story of participatory development institutions grounded in real life situations. Communities and individuals are willing to take action in their own interest. The information centres have become places of encounter, local action, and dialogue, where learning and exchange of ideas and knowledge continuously take place. The information resource centres have become tools for the creation of communities of learning. Apart from serving as reading rooms, they also host a wide variety of activities. These include meetings and debates on pressing social issues, workshops by extension agents in agriculture and public health, television and video viewing, literacy classes, drama and oral poetry/literature performances, cultural events, and quizzes. The sharing of knowledge of traditional skills on artefacts and handcrafts, stories and proverbs, and traditional medicine also takes place.

The growth in the use of these community information resource centres, directed to the reality of the people and building their capacity, has been astounding. The growth in membership of the centres has been significant – in one case increasing by 321% since HOACBP capacity building started (Adam 2002).

Libraries combat poverty

Information and knowledge are critical and strategic resources in human development, which includes literacy acquisition and poverty reduction. The rural and urban poor in sub Saharan Africa require access to appropriate information to fight poverty, deprivation, and illiteracy. The establishment of libraries and information centres that are rooted in the communities they serve is one way of ensuring that poor and marginalised people have access to affordable information, and their children have access to good books to support their education. The Millennium Development Goals highlight the need to address development in an integrated and holistic manner to achieve real development gains for the majority of the poor by 2015. Information and knowledge are at the heart of achieving these monumental but vital goals.

The three case studies presented here demonstrate that it is indeed possible to design community libraries and information centres which reduce poverty and deprivation and promote literacy. However, a successful delivery strategy for development information must include:

- empowerment of communities through their full participation to articulate their information needs;
- local information delivery that is accessible to communities, which can only be realised through significant government support for the sector;
- close cooperation with other agencies delivering services to poor and marginalised communities, including government agencies; and
- incorporation of the indigenous knowledge resources of the community in the community information exchange strategies.

Two other key needs are to have in place a trained and proactive information facilitator who can stimulate a good flow of development information and to create a strong information environment. In many contexts, information gaps must first be identified and appropriate information re-packaged.

The survey data from the public libraries indicates that a start has been made to provide development information to eradicate poverty and to acquire literacy. Much more, however, remains to be done to build the capacity of library services to enable them to adopt more innovative information delivery and development strategies. A reorientation of library development strategies is needed to embrace more community based approaches. Government involvement is essential to co-ordinate development information services offered by government extension agencies and NGOs, to extend the reach of public libraries into the poorest communities, and to enable capacity building and reorientation of services to take place. Only with sustained investment of this nature can the examples we have seen of community information successes be scaled up to reach the poorest and most vulnerable in every community through a network of "one stop" development information centres in rural and urban poor communities.

Recommendations

To create the libraries that could make a difference to poor communities, the following outline recommendations are made for library networks, on the one hand, and governments and aid donors, on the other.

Recommendations for library networks

Capacity building for librarians

It is important to create a critical mass of library and information workers in each country who have the skills and commitment to offer innovative services which can target poor and marginalized communities and create strong literate environments. In order to create nationwide networks of libraries that can promote development, there must be management systems, support and incentives to support the necessary transformation. Training for librarians and information centre managers will be needed in the areas of strategic planning, community needs assessment, development information delivery and participatory approaches to community development.

Partnerships for knowledge

Libraries need to position themselves centrally with regard to education, information and culture in the countries where they work by strengthening their links and partnerships with a range of other organisations. Links with development agencies will help libraries to acquire and utilise the widest possible range of development information and literacy materials.

Such links offer mutual benefits since libraries can also help development agencies to achieve better results, for example, providing follow-on support for newly literate adults to ensure that they don't lapse into illiteracy. They can also offer key resources to underpin other interventions, for example through providing books on agricultural methods. Community librarians also support formal education and lifelong learning, through offering access to books, support for teacher librarians, and helping to build the research skills of library users.

Knowledge sharing and local content creation

The role of libraries and information centres must also include clear strategies to deliver information in appropriate formats, languages and subject matter. Such strategies should use multiple communication methods (including books and other written materials, word of mouth, visual materials, drama, games and cultural interaction, and networks) to reach out to the whole community without excluding groups such as women, youth and minorities. An important challenge is to foster a culture of knowledge sharing among the community members. It is common for disempowered communities (and external agencies) to undervalue the vast resources of knowledge among their members.

In most cases, information centres in Africa are known for the global content they offer, rather than local knowledge or local language content, which are vital resources for

cultural promotion, learning and literacy. Reform of library and information services should especially include greater priority for recording and promoting indigenous knowledge of communities. The challenge here is for information centres to learn how to produce their own information products and repackage information which is rich in local content. A related challenge is establishing digital content creation to offer online services to users.

Assessing and mixing technology options

ICTs currently enable the exchange of information with anyone in the world at any time. New technologies are developing all the time and internet access, international telephone services and wireless communications are progressively becoming better and cheaper in sub Saharan Africa. However, it is important to assess technologies and to "mix and match" them to achieve the best results for different contexts. Other technologies such as cell phones, DVD, radio and video might in some cases be more appropriate and more accessible than investing in internet access. Above all, the needs of information users should drive the revolution and we should not fall into the trap of technology determinism.

Answering community information needs

Librarians need to refocus from monitoring service delivery to more active engagement with communities, to learn how best they can support them and to promote services that are appropriate to communities with a diverse range of information and literacy needs. The role of information specialists becomes that of "infomediaries" managing the process of turning information into knowledge for action.

Most libraries and information centres were built using a traditional approach to library management, which might not always reflect the needs of all members of the community served. Studies of user needs will enable the design of national information and knowledge systems that are responsive to the learning and development aspirations of all. This should include investigating the existing information and knowledge system to identify gaps and to strengthen what is already in place. An important part of the process will be to have robust mechanisms to measure the impact that information and knowledge centres have in achieving social change.

Recommendations for governments and aid donors

Create national information policies

The digital divide is just one aspect of a growing information and knowledge divide between the developed and the developing world. Governments in the developing world need to create and implement information policies to ensure that all sections of society benefit from the full use of information and knowledge for development. Knowledge creation, through research and development activities is a vital aspect of this, so too is the recording and use of indigenous knowledge through publications and community library initiatives. It is vital that information policies enable every community member to access the information they need to realise their potential and contribute to their own development and that of their local communities.

Provide a co-ordinating role for the information environment

Governments should foster links and partnerships between the public sector, private sector and civil society organisations to enable co-ordination of the information environment. Government leadership in this area would help to enhance awareness and cooperation between the wide variety of projects involved in production and dissemination of development information. An important part of this is for governments to provide a policy framework that nurtures the local book trade, encouraging publishing and bookselling in a wide range of subjects to meet readers' varied needs. In particular, there needs to be a greater focus on creating and disseminating materials to support the newly literate and those with poor literacy skills, for both those people who are in formal education and those who are not. There is a priority need for such materials in local languages, which are frequently in short supply.

Invest in the creation of literate environments

Literacy is a right and it is one that can only be achieved and sustained if proper investment is made to create the right environments in which people can easily access and use the printed word. Education policies need to prioritise the realisation of literate environments in rural and urban communities everywhere. Only by doing so can they ensure that large numbers of people will not lapse into illiteracy once formal education has ceased.

Only through sustained and significant investment in literacy as a basic skill upon which other learning rests can we ensure that the knowledge divide between the developed and the developing world does not grow wider and impact further on global income inequalities. There needs to be greater investment channelled into media, book publishing, and school and community libraries to create strong literate environments that support lifelong literacy and learning.

Invest in expansion of public library networks

There is a huge untapped potential that exists in Africa's libraries, as illustrated by the work done in Malawi to create community information centres in more than two hundred locations. Such creative solutions to resource shortages are possible but greater government and donor support is essential to realising access to information for all. Existing library structures in Africa need investment of resources and new initiatives, so that libraries respond to the information needs of both urban and rural populations in sub Saharan Africa.

There is also a need for far greater support to train librarians to overcome shortages of trained staff that exist throughout sub Saharan Africa, and also to equip the library sector to promote change and poverty reduction within the communities it serves.

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