National Libraries in Africa: Refocusing Their Work to Ensure Delivery of Services

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Abstract

This paper traces the establishment of African national libraries and the functions with which they are charged. It further discusses the self-examination and evaluation that national libraries, and African librarians in general, have undertaken over the years in a bid to ensure that they provide relevant services to their communities. The effects of the national libraries' commitment to support their respective countries' efforts to attain the UN's Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and their responses to the increasing use of ICTs in all aspects of life are both analyzed. Examples of best practices are given, and the paper concludes with a call to national libraries to look into the future and devise the best ways to provide the supportive role that will help to carry the Sustainable Development Agenda forward beyond 2015.

Introduction

The period after independence in the 1960s saw many countries in sub-Saharan Africa establish their own national libraries through some form of legislation.[1] Those established in the 1960s included the national libraries of Tanzania, established in 1963, Nigeria (1964), Kenya (1965), Cameroon (1966), Malawi (1967), and Botswana (1967). Others were established later: Benin (1975), Central African Republic (1987), and Rwanda (1989). Earlier, during the nineteenth century, national libraries had been established in South Africa (1818), Algeria (1835), and Egypt (1870, on the initiative of Khedive Ismail).

Some of these libraries were established to collect, preserve, and disseminate their respective country's documented heritage, as well as provide public library services. These include the national library services

of Botswana, Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland, and Tanzania. Those that were established to carry out a purely national library mandate include the national libraries of Cameroon, Egypt, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, and Tunisia. Another type of national library in Africa is that where the institution does not have a full responsibility of managing public libraries, but only an oversight role. The National Library of Uganda and the National Library of South Africa are examples of this.

Given that many public libraries in Africa hold both the repository and the public libraries mandate, albeit at varying levels of responsibility, it is inevitable that when discussing their growth and development, both roles must be included. This paper reviews the efforts of national libraries on the African continent to move away from the archetype of elite-focused institutions to being part of the development agenda of their nations and communities; it focuses mainly on selected libraries whose mandate covers both repository responsibilities and managing or overseeing public library services.

In the execution of their roles, national libraries with these dual responsibilities have to strike a balance between the two. They ensure that they work closely with publishers, authors, and any other persons and organizations to collect, preserve, and disseminate their respective country's documented heritage; they also must ensure that they provide a public library service that accords due attention to all sections of society, helping them access and use information for personal and societal development. Even though national libraries attempt to provide due attention to both, for most it is the public library services and not the repository role that has taken the central place in their services to society. This is mainly because public library services directly impact more people than a national library, whose resources are used mostly by researchers. In addition, for a continent where for centuries oral literature has been the dominant form of communication and the passing on of ideas, values, and traditions from one generation to another and where printed material is in short supply, it is inevitable that repositories are not given the same amount of attention as the public library services.

A Brief History of Service

The progress of African national libraries from their establishment has been one of a subtle evolution from isolated institutions that served only the educated elite to institutions that are fast becoming part of the community, and in some cases the center of the community. In order to fully understand and appreciate this paradigm shift, a brief history of the national library services on the continent must be given.

Many of the national libraries that had been established after independence operated as both national and public library services, hence the name "national library services" for countries like Botswana, Kenya,

Malawi, Swaziland, and Tanzania. They first established branch libraries in the major urban centers and later expanded into smaller towns and villages. They collect their respective nation's publications, which at the beginning were mostly government publications like annual and other reports, as these were the most available and easiest to trace, and also collect newspapers and textbooks, which have been the mainstay of the publishing industry in Africa for a long time. These repositories continue to expand as part of overall national library services in their respective countries; their use, however, has not been as extensive as that of their general collections.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the postindependence euphoria of the 1960s and '70s had worn off for most Africans. Some countries had gone through violent changes of government, many were experiencing a slow-down of their economies, and there was famine in some countries, such as Ethiopia. Africans began to take stock of their postindependence gains and losses. Librarians, like everyone around them, also began to review their achievements over the period. There was professional debate among African librarians that libraries, beside being grossly underfunded and neglected by governments, were not serving the needs of the population. Many argued that they had been established along the Western library model, serving only the educated urban elite, and were therefore not suitable for the African environment. Students, especially those in secondary schools, were the main users of the libraries, and even then they were using them as places to do their homework and other independent study because many found library collections irrelevant to their particular needs. They were therefore not using them as an information source but as quiet places in which to study and, in some cases, the only place where there was light for reading at night. It was obvious that if libraries were to remain relevant, library services established for the public had to cultivate and nurture their clientele's information needs. Academic libraries, on the other hand, had a ready-made clientele of faculty and students, but they were also caught up in the economic slowdown of the 1980s, and their collections had declined in both size and quality. Crowder (1986), at the Fifty-Sixth Standing Conference on Library Materials for Africa, also mentioned the subtle crisis of book shortages that was happening in countries in sub-Saharan Africa. If not addressed, he warned, this crisis would negatively affect future development in those countries. Overall, the situation of libraries in Africa painted a very grim picture.

The 1986 Standing Conference of Eastern, Central, and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL) held in Gaborone, Botswana, debated the role of libraries, especially public libraries as offered by the various national library services. It was argued that there was a need to have a librarian that was fully connected with the community. This librarian, referred to as the "barefoot librarian," would be embedded in the community, and

working alongside other extension workers to support the community in its development aspirations and efforts. The name "barefoot librarian" was coined to encompass the attitude, work ethic, and environment that the librarian needed to possess in order for her/him to resonate with the life of the many Africans that walked and went about their work and life with no shoes in the rural areas of Africa. Being shoeless symbolizes the humility and simplicity with which librarians were expected to approach their work.

This view was further emphasized by Mchombu (1990) in a paper presented at the Fifty-sixth General Conference of IFLA held in Stockholm. He highlighted the vast disconnect between public libraries and the communities they were established to serve, and argued for the need to clearly assess the information needs of rural Africans, who made up, and continue to do so, the majority of the population, and what they expected from a library. Library services would then be tailored to these requirements. Such services would need to go beyond providing print material; they would also involve collecting and documenting indigenous knowledge, encouraging use of the rich African oral literature and providing a central place in which community members could share experiences and learn from one another. In other words, such a service would be quite different from the Western public library model; it would focus on the African communal way of life and customize services for each particular community.

The debate on making libraries more relevant to the people continued during the 1990s. Some national libraries started to reach out to underserved communities, especially in rural areas. Libraries, however, continued to operate along the Western model, stocking print materials and expecting and assuming that the public would use them. User surveys were mostly not used to determine the viability of proposed services. Even then, if surveys were done, the only expectations were for print materials, mostly in European languages. The fact that the publishing industry in Africa was still young and publishing mostly textbooks in languages that many Africans were not literate in made stocking libraries with materials relevant to the African situation very difficult.

However, some library services did try to reach out to rural populations. An example is the Botswana National Library Service (BNLS). It collaborated with the Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFE), which was responsible for the Functional Adult Literacy program, to establish village reading rooms (VRRs). This was implemented with the intention of getting books into the hands of *neo*-literates who lived in remote areas where there were no public libraries. The first books supplied to the VRRs were in English and were at an elementary reading level because the people who were expected to use them had only recently graduated from adult literacy classes. A first evaluation of the VRRs revealed that users regarded the library materials on offer irrelevant to their needs. On realizing this,

and in addition to the fact that there were few books in Setswana (the local language), the BNLS and DNFE started to sponsor writers' workshops and publish books that would be suitable for the VRRs. First, the library service and the department identified the subjects of interest to rural populations, organized authors—mostly extension workers—and trained them to write simple books, which were then published. About fifty books in Setswana with relevant content for the local situation were published under this program. The subject matter of these books ranged from such concerns as teenage pregnancies and HIV/AIDS to fiction set in the typical Botswana environment.

Unfortunately, despite these efforts, the Western model was still used in the VRRs because the population was assumed not only to be able to read but also to make reading a regular habit. The populace was further expected to visit and use libraries, without any clear indication as to what they were supposed to gain from it. As generally understood by librarians, reading was supposed to be beneficial. However, most people would wish for an immediate, direct benefit from reading, such as increased income or relief from an ailment. The rural population therefore continued to obtain its information from the radio, friends, village meetings, or other means. Despite these challenges, a serious attempt was made by authorities to reach out to the underserved, which was later to provide the platform from which to launch the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in rural areas of the country.

There were other attempts on the continent to reach out to the people and provide a service that was relevant to local populations. In Uganda in 1999, the then Public Libraries Board, predecessor of the National Library of Uganda, collaborated with the local community, the International Development Research Center (IDRC), UNESCO, the British Council, and the International Telecommunications Union to establish the Nakaseke Tele-center and Library (Public Libraries Board, 1999). The aim was to take advantage of the ICTs that were now becoming commonplace, combine them with a traditional library, and involve local people to provide indigenous knowledge, which they would share with one another and then also be documented. As a result, part of the library collection was based on indigenous knowledge. This tele-center/library, now renamed the Nakaseke Multimedia Community Centre, has become the central place for the community to exchange ideas, best practices, and general information; it operates a library, radio station, computer-training facility, farmers' forum, and schools' club, among other functions. It is run by local people and financed by their local government. The National Library continues to provide support through library materials and training.

The center faced challenges at the beginning, including power outages, unreliable internet service, lack of expertise in operating the telecommunications equipment, a fire, and a high staff attrition rate. Despite

these challenges it has been very successful in recent years due to several reasons, including the involvement of the local community from the very start of the project; the holistic approach to the provision of information services that included other sources beside print materials; and the fostering of partnerships that brought in resources and expertise from various organizations.

NATIONAL LIBRARIES AND THE DAWN OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Two important events affecting the work of national libraries in Africa occurred at the beginning of the new millennium. World leaders, meeting at the UN headquarters in New York in September 2000, resolved to work toward "freeing all men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty" and to "create an environment—at the national and global levels alike—which is conducive to development and to the elimination of poverty" (UN, 2000). The world leaders set targets that came to be known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved within the next fifteen years. These MDGs include the following:

- The eradication of extreme poverty and hunger
- To achieve universal primary education
- The promotion of gender equality and the empowering of women
- The reduction of child mortality rates
- To improve maternal health
- To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
- To ensure environmental sustainability
- Establishing global partnerships for development

Three years after this declaration, in December 2003 the International Telecommunications Union, an agency of the UN, brought together nearly fifty heads of state and vice presidents to discuss what was named the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, 2003). More than 11,000 participants from 175 countries attended to discuss how ICTs could be used to support development throughout world. One of three round tables held during the summit discussed ICT as a tool to achieve the MDGs. It was recognized that ICTs had the potential to enhance education, labor productivity, and job opportunities, among other things; they could also be used to help combat disease, promote respect for human rights and democracy, and preserve the world's heritage through digitization.

In the meantime, other developments that affect the work of national libraries were also taking place. There was increasing talk among various professionals that indigenous knowledge in Africa was not being put to good use for the benefit of Africans. The 2002 SCECSAL conference held in Johannesburg was devoted to the appreciation, collection, documentation,

and utilization of Africa's indigenous knowledge for the benefit of its people and to examining and finding ways through which libraries could partner with local communities to achieve this. The keynote speaker at the conference called on LIS professionals to act more holistically regarding their role as information services providers and facilitators and to ensure that indigenous knowledge became part of the information package that they were offering to their clientele (Raseroka, 2002). Speaker after speaker expressed concern about the abundant and very useful African indigenous knowledge that librarians were not helping communities to document for the benefit of all. None of the speakers were from national or public libraries in which indigenous knowledge collection and documentation would naturally reside; all, however, argued that the professionals concerned must take this matter on. This issue has continued to be part of the discussion regarding the need for more African content on the internet.

With these important developments, both globally and on the continent, national libraries in Africa can no longer remain as isolated facilities, and they need to strategically position themselves to be part of the development agenda helping their countries to achieve the MDGs. They need to rethink their commitment and work within the community and to take advantage of the infusion of ICTs in all aspects of life so as to reach out to as many people as possible. The neutrality and safe-haven status of libraries within their communities render them as the natural space and service to be used by all concerned to achieve the MDGs. Therefore, libraries commenced using different strategies to do this, as discussed below.

People Centricity
During the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, national libraries shifted their focus to more community engagement and support in the attainment of the MDGs. Each goal had to be critically interrogated and a suitable means devised to support its attainment. Librarians became more aware of the need to take into consideration, appreciate, and work together and support local people, especially in rural areas. Anchoring their work on the MDGs and the clarity of these goals, librarians have attempted since then to identify which issues affect the communities they serve and have customized their services along these lines. The issues that mostly affect the African people are: the education of their children; food security; income from agricultural produce; crop diseases; maternal and child health; HIV/AIDS; and youth unemployment.

Librarians understood early on that working with other service workers was vital if they were to truly connect with the populace. They have done this by consulting education, health, agriculture, environmental, and other workers in the community to identify local needs and the issues that involve both communities and individuals in their daily lives. Librarians then work side by side with them on these issues; the other workers

provide expertise, with library professionals providing the supporting information and suitable environment in which to address these matters. Librarians have further designed programs that help communities attain computer literacy and the use of the internet and financial and other skills. Individuals can then use these to address issues in their personal lives, such as searching for educational and employment opportunities, acquiring new skills to increase their employment potential, and sharing information on matters like food pests that affect everyone in a given community. All of this supports the vital work toward eradicating poverty and providing an environment conducive to development.

National libraries, in different ways, have also supported their respective country's achieving quality universal primary education by working toward establishing school libraries. An example of this was the school libraries development project in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda that was supported by the Swedish International Development Agency during the first decade of the twenty-first century. These projects involved the collaboration of the entire book sector in the East African region. The national libraries collaborated with publishers, booksellers, teachers, and others to deliver supplementary readers to over a thousand schools across the region and to train teachers in library management and reading promotion and help them establish their own school libraries, albeit on small scales (East African Book Development Association, 2011).

Partnerships
In the past, national libraries, as indeed all libraries, have tended to work in isolation—stand-alone institutions that have considered themselves as providing a supportive information-provision role to what others were doing directly in society. The use of ICTs and therefore global interconnectivity and the tendency of the modern person to "live" on the internet means that every person, every sector, and every institution must form partnerships in order to meaningfully contribute to the development of mankind.

National libraries in Africa have therefore formed partnerships with other government agencies, corporate bodies, and NGOs, as well as individuals involved in developing their respective countries. The purpose of this is multiple: namely, to access funding, gain expertise, and become more visible and engaged with the community. In the past, national libraries depended on their governments' funding; indeed, governments still remain their main source of funding. With so many competing demands on public resources, governments can provide only a small portion of what libraries need; consequently, they must seek funding from elsewhere. Examples of these partnerships abound. The Kenya National Library Service (KNLS), for example, has partnered with Safaricom, a telecommunications company, to share space at its new Buru Buru Branch Library in one of Nairobi's suburbs; it has also partnered with World Reader, a US

company, and e-Limu, a Kenyan company, to provide tablets loaded with e-learning materials. In the libraries of Kibera, Kisumu, Meru, and Waji, the tablets were provided by World Reader and the content by e-Limu. The KNLS branches then work with schools in the nearby areas that do not have access to textbooks. This partnership has helped the library service to deliver on its mandate and helped pupils and teachers, who otherwise would have had very little opportunity to access textbooks.

The National Library and Archives of Namibia (NLAN) has, through the Namibian Ministry of Education, accessed funding from the Millennium Development Challenge (MDC) to build three regional resource and study centers that provide community-focused services, such as information on health, agriculture, and employment issues. These regional centers are also expected to serve as support hubs for the branch and community libraries within their respective areas. This partnership has fostered NLAN's working with IREX, a US nonprofit developmental organization, as well as with the ministry, to execute this project. The funding is provided by the MCF, the expertise by IREX, and the supervision by NLAN. In another partnership, NLAN, together with the Tanzania Library Services Board, has been supported over the past four years by the Finnish Library Association (FLA) to implement the training of librarians in both countries. This triangular partnership means that the two library services benefit from the FLA and also from one another's expertise.

In 2010, the Ghana Library Services Board, Northern Region partnered with the Netherlands-based Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) foundation and the National Service Scheme to provide ICT training, combined with leadership training, to unemployed youths. During the period of a year, close to 200 youths received training in computer and internet access, which has proved very beneficial for the communities in which the training is implemented. The Ghana board has brought the neutral, safe environment of the library and its expertise into the partnership, and the National Service Scheme has helped with the mobilization of the youths, while EIFL has provided the funding. A result of this partnership is the growth in library use by the community, an increase in the library's status, and the addressing of individual developmental needs, as evidenced by individual testimonies (EIFL, 2015).

The National Library of Uganda (NLU) partnered with the US Library of Congress to digitize local Ugandan materials for the World Digital Library, an internet-based resource to which libraries and archives from throughout the world contribute. In this partnership, the NLU received funding, training, and equipment. The digitized material is not only preserved but is now available to a broader spectrum of the NLU's users.

Embracing ICTs
National Libraries in Africa have now fully embraced the use of ICTs, both in their internal operations as well as in their service to communities.

Funding from national governments and international organizations has helped to propel this development forward. Their focus has moved from concern about statistics of library members, users, and volumes to using ICTs in contributing toward the attainment of the MDGs.

In Botswana, for example, in 2009 the BNLS, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Global Libraries Initiative, embarked on a project to place computers in its branch and community libraries as well as in the VRRs. It equipped seventy-eight libraries with computers, over four hundred computer sets were distributed, and over four hundred library workers and forty thousand members were trained. During the four years of this support, the project, named Sesigo, changed the face of Botswana's libraries, making them a vital facility and service in the community (Sesigo Project, 2010). The number of individuals both young and old using the library services has grown tremendously. There are numerous stories about individuals whose lives have been positively impacted since computers became available in public libraries; for instance, young people have been able to gain computer skills and search for jobs, health workers now have access to information on the internet, and children learn and help one another with homework using public libraries.

In Kenya, the KNLS created e-health service in its branch libraries in Kisumu and Eldoret where health workers could obtain health-related information on the internet. Close to two thousand health workers and members of the public were trained in accessing health-information resources over a period of a year. A result of this is that the two branch libraries have now become hubs for trainings and lectures on HIV/AIDS and the tropical diseases that affect their communities. This has also resulted in a long-term partnership with the Kenyan Ministry of Health.

In Uganda, the NLU has supported the Hoima Public Library in introducing a health service. Using the internet and in collaboration with health workers, the library has been able to help people in the community learn about how to use mosquito nets in fighting against malaria. Such usage of nets is estimated to have risen by 70 percent in just one year, and hence the incidences of malaria decreased. In the Kabale Public Library in southeastern Uganda, partnering with the African Medical Research Foundation and with support from the NLU, ICTs usage was introduced in the library. The service specifically targets unemployed youths, with the result that these youths, who have had no common place to meet, have been taken off the streets and are now using their time gainfully, looking for information on employment and training opportunities.

Strategic Positioning
For a long time, libraries in Africa had remained on the fringes of development, and this may have been because of lack of a deliberate effort to strategically position themselves in the main areas of development. In the twenty-first century, African library leaders have learned to network and

adopt a more businesslike method of implementing their mandate. Whenever there is a making of or review of their countries' development plans, libraries' achievements and requirements are clearly stated, thus ensuring their inclusion in the allocation of national resources. An example of this is KNLS's inclusion in Kenya's development plans (Republic of Kenya, 2013). Moreover, a new national library is being built as one of the projects during the plan period. In Namibia, the NLAN is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. From the projects that are being implemented under NLAN, it is clear that there is a deliberate move by the ministry to ensure that the teaching and learning in Namibian schools is being fully supported by public libraries.

CONCLUSION

National libraries in Africa have undergone a transformation in the way they view their role in society. They are using the expertise that exists within their ranks to take on the role of being the community-change agent. They have evolved over the years to become community conscious and embrace ICTs to bridge the digital divide within both their countries and communities in support of achieving the UN's MDGs. The national libraries have become more aware of the need to help communities capture and use their indigenous knowledge for their individual and personal development. In addition, realizing and emphasizing the need for Africa to preserve its documented heritage, national libraries as heritage institutions have also taken on the important role of digitalizing documents of national importance that may be under threat of extinction. The post-2015 era will be a crucial one for national libraries because they will need to redouble their efforts to contribute to the Sustainable Development Agenda in their individual countries and on the continent as a whole.

NOTE

1. Brief histories of national libraries in Africa can be found in Mwiyeriwa (1994), Saunders (1994), and Saunders and Saunders (1994). See also the multiple entries, according to country, in Bates and Maack's edited volume, *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences* (2010).

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