Libraries and information provision for African relief

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This research article explores the concept that libraries as communication centres in sub-Saharan Africa can play a vital role in bringing poverty relief by providing greater access to information through modern technology. It discusses the patrons who can benefit from community information centres and explores their particular needs. I have researched how modern tools like the Internet, computers, e-readers and cell phones can bring valuable information to impoverished citizens. My research was conducted through reading research papers using article databases, books and Internet websites. The future for libraries in sub-Saharan Africa is bright, as new technology opens up vast opportunities to share information in a way that is accessible, affordable and adaptable to the needs of the African people. I recommend that librarians and relief organisations in Southern Africa seriously consider using modern technology to provide information that will empower its citizens.

Introduction

Libraries in sub-Saharan Africa can play an important role in poverty relief, by providing access to information through modern formats. Information can facilitate freedom from oppression and protection from exploitation. However, books alone have not been able to solve the resource deficit for the poorest people in Africa. There is hope for poverty-stricken people who have had no access to information, since through modern technology like the Internet, cell phones, laptops and e-readers, libraries have new options. Many Africans come from an oral culture and do not connect with books as readily as people in the Western culture. African society is quickly adapting to technology and is now on the threshold of an information explosion.

An information famine has existed that is 'as disastrous for Africa's long-term future as the catastrophic absence of food' (Crowder 1986, as cited in Sturges & Neil 2004:5). Meeting the resource needs of impoverished people can have tremendous potential to reduce the destruction wreaked by poverty and disease. Librarians must adapt to meeting the needs of African society in a modern context by using advanced technology. As custodians of information centres, librarians can help Africans 'access the knowledge they need to enable them to realise their potential and act as agents in their own development' (Harrity 2008:209).

What are Africa's information needs at the present time?

The demographic make-up of Africa has been altered by the devastation caused by a pandemic of HIV-related diseases over the past 20 years. The needs of a society that has been adversely affected by HIV have to be taken into consideration when planning a library in Africa. (The region of Africa addressed in this article is sub-Saharan Africa, and the library users are those impoverished people earning $1 – $2 per day.)

Over 24 million people in Africa have died as a result of AIDS, making it the most affected region in the world (Allemano 2008). This has resulted in the traditional family structure being broken, leaving the fragmented lives of vulnerable children and grieving grandparents. Today, Africa has 12 million orphans, many of whom live in child-headed households with no adult caregivers to raise or protect them. In addition, numerous of these orphans live homeless on the streets. Orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC) are open to exploitation such as human trafficking, sexual abuse and criminal behaviour. A grandmother who has buried her own children may be caring for an average of 10 grandchildren. Adults living with HIV find it difficult to feed their families.

It is not unusual for students to attend schools that have few books and no library. For example, Baluba Basic School in Kitwe, Zambia, has 1200 students but no library. Children who cannot afford school fees remain uneducated and illiterate. Yet people in poor communities also have the fundamental right of access to information. A library as a resource centre for OVC, impoverished

adults, grandmothers and students can bring hope and life-sustaining information. In her book *There is No Me Without You,* Melissa Fay Greene (2006) asks these haunting questions:

> … who will parent 12 million children orphaned by HIV/AIDS … Who will tell 12 million bedtime stories? … Who will offer grief counselling to … 36 million children? Who will help them avoid lives of servitude or prostitution? Who will pass on to them the traditions of culture and religion, of history and government, of craft and profession? (pp. 22–23)

For more than 12 million children who have no parents, perhaps librarians must take a step towards providing a safe place for children to gather information and to find hope for a better life. Sturges and Neil (2004:158) emphasise the need for librarians to be 'as engaged as, or more so, than the parents'. A library that serves a society severely impacted by HIV has to adjust to the changes that the virus has brought. A functional library that meets the needs of African society can play a key role in helping the United Nations reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for reducing poverty: 'NGO's working on different projects of the MDGs can collaborate with libraries to enhance the effectiveness of their activities to achieve the MDGs' (Iya 2009:100).

Past organisations that have established libraries in Africa used a Western ideology in their planning and implementation; as Du Plessis (2008:45) states: 'libraries have not become responsive to [*the*] African context.' For a sustainable library plan, the diverse African cultures and the needs of individual communities must be studied and understood. Needs assessment surveys have to address the question as to how information can be formatted to make it useful and understandable to the user: 'Effective libraries in any context begin with a thorough understanding of the individuals to be served, their needs, and the … general cultural context in which they operate' (Meyers 2009:6). When people's needs are taken into consideration, they feel respected and will respond to the project with a sense of ownership.

According to Dent's article (2006:20–29), Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda questioned 1000 residents about their needs. The library was planned with the aim of offering information in a transferable format. Today it is established as an intentional information service provider to the community, serving teachers and students of the nearby schools and residents. In January 2010, 1147 people were registered as members of the library, even though they pay a small user fee. Illiteracy is a huge issue that cannot be ignored. A Family Literacy Project serves illiterate members. There are rooms for reading, computers and a community hall. Kitengesa's library is a vibrant model of a community centre that serves the diverse needs of its members. It is an excellent example of a relevant African library that has become a model for similar projects being established in other rural communities (Dent 2006:20–29).

Africans who live in one-room mud brick homes have a great need for a quiet place to read. Sturges and Neil (2004:180) state that 'For many people it is the struggle for

quiet that is most important'. Raseroka (1986:288–291) says 'Students' need for public libraries stem from … the need for an environment which is supportive of studying … a quiet area of study, a well lit place of study…'. Most people in the developed world have comfortable homes that provide quiet spaces; in underdeveloped countries homes have no place for quiet study, and a library can fill that need.

When users have a quiet place to read for pleasure, the community will develop a 'reading culture' (Dent 2008:523). Jane Meyers recognised the need for vulnerable children to have a place to read, and founded the Lubuto Library Project in Lusaka, Zambia, which was built for street orphans as a reading centre: 'Lubuto works within the culture rather than imposing an outside perspective' (Meyers 2008:6). Books are not checked out, but the library is open for long hours and accommodates users such as street children and those who live in child-headed households. Children can enter a peaceful environment where they escape the harshness of life on the streets.

On the other hand, libraries must also be a noisy place for the community to gather and exchange information. This makes the library a centre for socialisation, conversation and communication.

To become relevant in meeting the unmet need … the public library in Africa has to break the traditional 'silence' in information transfer … associated with a library. It has to transform to give way to 'noise', allowing the creation of a public sphere where people can exchange information and share ideas relevant to their context and needs. (Du Plessis 2008:48)

A library can be a central meeting place for people to connect, learn and share. A community centre can provide education for micro-enterprises, industry or agriculture relevant for the region. Offering health education is necessary and life-saving, as people are informed about sanitation, availability of medicine, disease prevention and maternal health. It is clear that because of their pressing physical need for food and the means of producing food, clothing, shelter and health care, people need information to help them find assistance (Sturges & Neil 2004:183). Timely medical information concerning HIV-related diseases, malaria and tuberculosis can take years to trickle down from reliable sources to rural areas. Community centres can receive current and authoritative health information, which they can pass along to their members.

The issue of funding

The question arises as to who will pay for libraries in African countries, when most of their own governments have no money to subsidise them. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have provided billions of dollars in assistance to alleviate poverty in Africa, and need to provide funds to also bring relief from the information famine. As Nyana (2009:13) states: 'without support from 1st world donors, it would be

difficult for libraries in Africa to exist.' Yet Du Plessis (2008:44) believes that 'excessive reliance on donations appeared only to lead to increasing dependence'. He says that poverty is a reality that cannot be ignored, and libraries must keep this fact within the framework when planning a resource centre for the community.

The poorest people do not earn enough money to support a library. Outside help will always be necessary. Sturges and Neil (2004) state that NGOs support the distribution of information, but still need to recognise that this support can be provided well in the context of a library. Communities must acknowledge the need for a library and become involved in its establishment if they are to have a sense of ownership.

John Wood, founder of Room to Read, has successfully built 10 000 libraries in developing countries. A main stipulation is 'community ownership' and 'strong local staff and partnerships' (Room to Read 2010). The community must become intrinsically involved in establishing and maintaining a library. If the library is successfully empowering people, their ability to earn more income will increase along with their potential to contribute funds.

Mchombu (1986 as cited in Du Plessis 2008:48) states that 'standards of information services must be tailored to the economic ability of a country'. Funding for a library in Africa ought to be a combination of donations from the West and commitment from the community. Kitengesa Community Library has come up with innovative ways to bring in funds. Members must pay a small fee, one room has a sewing business, there is a small tree farm on the property, and charging up of cell phones all bring in funds. Libraries can come up with creative ways to bring in extra funds that can still fit in within the library model.

Facilitating reading through technology

As Africa embraces the technological age, Sturges and Neil (2004:229) predict that the continent will advance faster in technology than the developed world. Information literacy is a need that can be met by the library, so that the users can become adept at accessing information in a digital format: 'The world over, libraries have to adjust to the digital era. Libraries are not about books, but information' (Du Plessis 2008:50).

Conventional thinking suggests that Africa has to catch up with the Western world in its evolution of information technology. There is talk of the digital divide, and that newer technology will leave the poor further behind in the dust. The fact is that Africa has 'leapfrogged' into the technology age and is adapting quickly to modern technology (Keller 2010 as cited in Davis 2010:33). In Africa many people never owned landline telephones, but in 2004 cell phones were introduced – and now have a strong presence at all levels of African society. Someone who cannot afford electricity or running water owns a cell phone. This is a combination of clever marketing, good infrastructure and fierce competition amongst providers: 'In the cell phone the developing world has confirmed its preference for spoken word communication, delivered by affordable technology' (Harvey & Sturges 2010:157).

The Shuttleworth Foundation in South Africa uses new technology to encourage reading amongst teenagers by sending e-books via cell phones. Two books have been read 34 000 times: 'For the foreseeable future the cell phone … is the e-reader of Africa. Yoza aims to capitalise on that to get Africa's teens reading and writing' (m4Lit Project 2010). The organisation One Laptop per Child designed laptops made to withstand rough handling in adverse conditions: 'Digital books and textbooks can be downloaded onto these laptops making it possible for each child to have a small library in his or her hand' (Keller 2010 as cited in Davis 2010:32–33).

Another visionary organisation, Worldreader.org, conducted an e-reader trial at OrphanAid Africa School in Ghana. Worldreader's directive is to provide digital books (Kindles) to all people in the developing world. In their report Sundermeyer, Risher and McElwee (2010) state that the trial was a success. The community already had Internet infrastructure in place and students were familiar with cell phones, so quickly learned how to use the Kindles. The students said that they loved the dictionary option to help them find the meanings of new words, and became so engaged in reading that they forgot they were using a digital device. Thousands of books are now available to children who used to share a few books. The 'text in speech' function was useful for illiterate parents to listen to a story (Kitengesa Community Library 2010).

Libraries must think of the future, and about how they can provide for users in Africa. With wireless infrastructure in place, more information is made available to the most disadvantaged people. Libraries in Africa have to consider setting up Internet stations and linking with libraries in the Western world to share information with their members. Shipping books by container to Africa takes months and thousands of dollars. Providing digital information in sub-Saharan Africa presents challenges due to poverty, availability of electricity and wireless capabilities, but with determination and a willingness to work alongside the challenges there is potential for resources to reach thousands of people who never had access to them before. By providing information in a digital format, costs are decreased and the impact is greater.

The charge of bringing information to impoverished communities in new ways is not a task that can be accomplished by one person or one organisation. Organisations that have a successful model must share what they have learned with the worldwide community. They must provide manuals about building a library, training staff, obtaining funding and

using resources in order to help other organisations. They can use modern resources via the Internet to pass along information so that the community library model can be used in many places to bring information to people.

Books will always have a place in libraries, but technology is providing new formats to cross the digital divide. William Kamkwamba writes how one book in a small, disorganised library in Malawi changed his life. Kamkwamba's father could not afford school fees, so instead Kamkwamba studied at the local library. When he came across a book with instructions on how to build a windmill, he read it and built a windmill out of spare parts. This windmill brought electricity to his home, and eventually a scholarship to attend high school (Kamkwamba & Mealer 2009). How many more stories of hope will be repeated across the continent as more information becomes available in easily accessible ways? Perhaps the very people that are provided with modern solutions through digital information will one day be needed to bring solutions to the Western world.

Libraries can join in the movement of providing new technology to poor people. Technology through the conduit of libraries can bridge the digital divide between developed and developing worlds. This makes the potential for the future bright indeed.

Acknowledgements
Competing interests

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