
Community Librarianship and Access to Information

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Abstract

This paper examines the importance of community librarianship to access to information by those who dwell in rural societies. Information is key to the development of any society especially rural societies and community librarianship which aid the provision of library and information services to a particular rural community is paramount in the quest for the development of our rural areas, the provision of community librarianship focuses particularly on social, domestic, health and educational needs of the rural areas, their culture inclusive. Therefore, for community librarianship to be impactful, public libraries must provide community base information that will enhance the development of the rural area. The highlight in this paper includes, the importance of libraries in rural areas, community library services, librarianship and human right, ways through which librarians can reach their community, etc.

Keywords: Public Libraries, Community Development, Community Building, Access, Librarianship.

INTRODUCTION

A library is a collection of sources of information and similar resources, made accessible to a defined community for reference or borrowing. It provides physical or digital access to material, and may be a physical building or room, or a virtual space, or both. Library aims at: to have a vibrant role in the development of a culture that promotes wider reading, motivated readers and learners for life, to provide a place for collaborative learning, creativity, and for developing independent research and information literacy skills, guaranteeing access to knowledge. The role of Library as gateway to knowledge and culture, library plays a fundamental role in society. They play an essential role in enabling the delivery of library services to the public and in achieving the copyright system's goals of encouraging creativity and learning.

Building Cross Cultural Capacities for Universal Access to Information and Knowledge in our communities has become a thing of concern to librarians. Library and Information Services for Community Development contemporarily is a must to do, this is because information is a key factor that is needed for a sustainable development of any community. The critical nature of information makes it a resilient mainstay that must be utilized in order to grasp a sustainable development. One could hardly imagine the current civilization without information and globalization. According to Dent, Goodman &Kevane

(2013), in developed as well as developing countries, libraries play an important role in the dissemination of knowledge. The availability of information resources can often mean the difference between poverty and prosperity.

Public libraries play a role in providing business resources and collections in their institutions in order to respond to the world economic challenges. They are also essential to the functioning of a democratic society by providing free and equal access to high-quality information.

Librarianship involves collecting, organizing, preserving and disseminating information to those who need it. Librarians help their constituencies find and make use of information contained in a collection of various kinds, sizes and resources to support individual needs as well as an organization's strategic goals. It can also be seen as: a profession that is concerned with acquiring and organizing collections of books and related materials in libraries and servicing readers and others with these resources.

A community can be seen as: the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common or a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.

Community Librarianship therefor has to do with dissemination of information to immediate community where a particular library is domicile. The community library must be an integral part of the area it serves. The concept of development could be conceived using different viewpoints from different scholars.

Melkote (1991) sees development as the satisfaction of needs, indigenous self-reliance, and life in harmony with the environment. While Obetta and Okide (n.d) see it as a process by which man increases or maximizes his control and use of the material resources with which nature has endowed him and his environment. According to Servaes (1996), it is a multidimensional process that involves change in social structures, attitudes, institution, economic-growth, reduction of inequality and the eradication of poverty. Simply put, the term 'development' can be defined as something which changes circumstances for the improved. When applied to the rural areas, it means that rural development cannot be achieved without building the capacities of the rural people whose involvement is critical in any effort to transform their lives. Rural development therefore means the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in the rural areas.

El-Kalash and Ahamed (2014) argued that development does not necessarily end with economic prosperity, but transcends this one indicator to include psychological, social, political and environmental change for the betterment and well-being of society. While Omotola (2006) asserts that sustainable development is a development that lasts and does not crumble in the face of formidable problems: it does not roll back or recede even in the face of threatening reversal waves. Giddings, Hopwood and O'Brien (2002), in their opinion noted that sustainable development has to do with meeting the present social, political, economic, cultural, etc., need of both the nations and the individuals living in those nations without compromising the development and needs of the future generations.

The phrase 'Community Librarianship' is defined by Feather and Sturges (2003) as "the provision of library and information services of special relevance to a particular community, at community level. Provision focuses particularly on social, domestic, health or educational facilities, details of local cultural activities, clubs and societies, and the range of local authority or governmental services." According to them, "public libraries have long accepted this as a major responsibility, providing community information and meeting facilities, but it may also be provided via a special unit set up by a local authority, a voluntary agency or an advice group. Community librarianship has come to have a higher profile in recent years as a mechanism by which libraries can contribute to overcoming problems of

social exclusion. Community information enables individuals to make informed decisions relating to themselves, their dependents and their communities, and can promote participation, social inclusion and access to the democratic process.

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Information needs of a community are of the utmost importance and the collection and services of the library represent those needs. There are many ways a library can be beneficial to the community i.e., there are many services that can be rendered by a librarian to the communities. The community librarian lives in the community and has close personal relationships with the users. The community librarian can identify the needs of the community and how to provide for those needs in a way that is best suited to the user. User needs and community assessment have been identified as major contributors to the success of a library.

It is important for a library to study its community so that it may know the people, groups, and institutions in the library's service responsibility and can develop a program fitted to their needs. The community library must be an integral part of the area it serves; Communities differ, as do people, a service institution such as the library must be closely related to its constituency. Determining the categories of people and what collections and services are needed by these people is imperative to providing relevant library services. Regrettably in most public libraries needs assessment is not done because of insufficient funding, a lack of staff and a shortage of research skills to carry out this task. Meanwhile, needs assessment is the foundation on which every library's collection and services are based.

Importance of libraries in rural areas

The importance of libraries to the communities cannot be overemphasized. Libraries are seen by many as a lifeline and a crucial public service, especially to the elderly, socially isolated, poor, vulnerable, drug addicts, prostitutes, etc. Age UK Blog (2013) posits that libraries are so important to the rural elderly and went further to give the following reasons why we must protect and improve them:

They're accessible

The obvious advantage of having a local library is that it is local. Accessibility is crucial if you have mobility problems and/or haven't got the money for bus fare.

They help to bridge the digital divide

Elderly people in rural areas face significant challenges when it comes to IT access, including infrastructure problems and set-up costs. The vast majority of public libraries offer free IT access and basic IT training to the public.

They help to combat social isolation

Libraries are social places where people can chat, read and keep in touch with the outside world. For elderly people who can't access a static library, mobile and housebound services

can fill the gap. Sometimes a friendly smile from a library worker can make all the difference to an isolated and vulnerable persons day or week.

With the above points, it can be deduced that public libraries can help to increase the quality of life of the rural elderly; therefore, it is indispensably important that we protect and improve them for upcoming generations. It also important to note that: In rural areas, the local library, along with the village hall, pub and shop, is the focal point of community life. It is a safe, trusted place for meeting friends and neighbours, a place for learning, information and leisure and sometimes just a place to keep warm.

1-King County in Washington State listed 5 ways Professionals in the fields of library and information science can build a strong community. Five facets of community building explored are: (1) how libraries serve as a conduit to access information and to learn, (2) how libraries encourage social inclusion and equity, (3) how libraries foster civic engagement, (4) how libraries create a bridge to resources and community involvement, and (5) how libraries promote economic vitality within the community. The public libraries in this state are effectively building community through their library services.

Community Library Services

User Education

This is the training services the librarian renders to the user in order to help him/her use the library profitably. User education has two levels. The library orientation level which introduces the user to the library help the user to know the physical location of the different sections of the library. The next level is the bibliographic instruction which exposes the user to the use of information-retrieval tools such as the catalogue, reference materials etc.

Recreational Services

Modern ensures the provision of recreational materials such as newspapers, magazines, fiction etc. and relaxation areas where users can watch television, listen to radio tapes, play music or hold conferences.

Reprographic Services

The provision of bindery services which are now very important in libraries is another skill of the librarian. He repairs damaged books, bind periodicals long essays and dissertations at very minimal rate. He also provides photocopying services to make desired information available to users at also a very low rate.

Libraries help to ensure that non-English speakers see themselves represented in their communities. Through multilingual library websites, libraries help non-English speakers see themselves represented in their communities. Public libraries often collect books in languages other than English, incorporate appropriate signage, and hire librarians and staff members who are multilingual. Additionally, some libraries can even offer bilingual book clubs. Services like these help all community members recognize the depth of diversity that exists in their communities.

Libraries provide information, resources, and support for patrons with (special needs) disabilities. Diversity is not just about ethnicity, language, or culture, public libraries provide unique and easy-going spaces and services for clientele with incapacities. Public libraries can offer selections of tools and services, from software and equipment to special collections

and homebound programs. Some libraries can go a step further by developing creative programs to partner with patrons with disabilities.

Archives preserve historic artefacts, oral histories, digital history projects, and monographs relevant to the community, including minority groups. Communities lucky enough to have archivists have a great advantage when it comes to organizing historical records and articles. An organized archive is a place where people can research genealogy and immigration history, do environmental research, and more. An archivist is an advocate for preservation who, among other things, coordinates the restoration of maps and paintings, the digitization of vital records, and the creation of oral history projects.

Libraries are important partners in sustainability. As key municipal agencies, and focal points for community education, libraries are major players in creating liveable, environmentally friendly cities and towns. Beyond ensuring that library construction projects consider environmental impact, libraries can take a lead in supporting local foods and handicrafts workers by partnering with local businesses to pioneer a farmers' market in the community.

Libraries are places where people come to know themselves and their communities:

People may go to the library looking mainly for information, but they find each other there. Students preparing for external exams meet in the library and discuss their challenges, new mothers connect at baby story-times; elderly people, often facing difficult life transitions, attend events and find that they make new friends; teenagers meet up in libraries' teen spaces after school; and readers (free readers association) discuss current events in the periodicals room.

Libraries serve as catalysts for addressing social problems. Public librarians know their communities and always have first-hand information. They are often the first to recognize a pressing local need, simply because they interact on a daily basis with patrons from all walks of life. This puts libraries and librarians in the best position not only to bring local issues to municipal governments and social agencies, but also to partner with local governments and agencies to address the needs of a community.

Libraries provide important business resources, especially for small local businesses. With the recent collapse of many big corporations (Economic meltdown), it has become more widely acknowledged that small businesses provide most of the new jobs in our current economy. Libraries have a long history of serving local entrepreneurs and businesses with needed information.

Libraries provide immigrants with helpful information about, and opportunities to connect with, their new communities. Not only are libraries gateways to the community, they provide a place where new immigrants and their families can connect with resources, learn new skills, and meet new people. An online learning module offered for librarians interested in providing new or improved services to new immigrants. Services like these make libraries essential for new immigrants, as they provide services and information about their new community and government while at the same time meeting the needs of these new patrons in an accessible and appropriate way.

Libraries provide access to nonmainstream points of view and give voice to local authors. Public libraries strive to provide collections and services that represent various points of view, and often work closely with local artists to do so. In many communities, local authors seek out public libraries as places to promote and make their new books available in public libraries.

Libraries, which champion, promote, and reflect important democratic values, are a part of the community's political life. Libraries can play an important role in the political life of a community by gathering community members and encourage them to talk about issues of

freedom, justice, and democracy. Libraries also help citizens learn how to become advocates for themselves and their communities.

Libraries serve as the “people’s university”. In a time when education is increasingly expensive, public libraries can provide information and educational opportunities free for all people, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Libraries can present classes and discussion programs, or even provide online continuing education courses.

Libraries go beyond providing content to enabling patrons to create their own content. Librarians know that patrons aren’t just information consumers, they’re information producers. Patrons use the library to gain knowledge in order to create their own new and independent works. Increasing numbers of libraries provide spaces and services that meet the needs of people who want to learn how to edit Wikipedia, set up blogs or podcasts, create their own zones, and so much more.

Libraries are important partners in child development. Through library collections, programs, and physical spaces, children learn to share, to be engaged in their communities, to participate in the arts, and to explore their immediate world and the world at large. There are many examples of innovative library services for children.

Free tutoring, homework help programs, and summer reading programs for kids and teens help bridge the economic divide that impacts students’ academic performance. The cost of hiring a private tutor is well beyond what many library patrons can afford, so libraries offer homework help and tutoring online, by phone, in person, and even through social media and homework apps. Reading, essay writing, debate, quizzes etc. are programs that always have a positive impact on students’ academic performances.

Library and Community services

The existence of libraries ensures that knowledge and technology are available to everyone, not just to those who can afford their own. This is more than charity work; this helps raise the education levels of society as a whole. Libraries are spaces where people of all ages can practice lifelong learning. Also, in times of disaster, they serve as critical community pivots and communication centres.

Mobile library

If a community is unfortunate enough not to have a static library, then mobile/housebound services fill the gap, helping those that are most isolated. Libraries have traditionally been committed to providing information access to all patrons regardless of their status in society. Libraries offer opportunities for remote access, making it possible for those who can’t get to the library to still access the library’s cultural and educational offerings. In addition to bookmobiles and databases, many libraries go above and beyond to make their services available to everyone. Most libraries do not have official car attached to them but because of passion for librarianship and dissemination of information, some librarians go out of their ways by using their personal cars or even public transport bearing the cost in reaching out to communities with their information needs.

Prison population is not left behind in mobile library services. There should be a manual directing the proper materials that should be made available for inmates’, example is the collections of materials for moral and religious education can be made available to them. Through the services of librarians, inmates can be rehabilitated into society. Not only the inmates, libraries provide information resources, for prostitutes and destitute. Libraries are much-needed safe spaces and supportive librarians are allies and mentors. The Library can also maintain a blog that connects such peculiar readers.

ADVOCACY

Advocacy is an activity by an individual or group which aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions. Advocacy can include many activities that a person or organization undertakes including media campaigns, public speaking etc. Special education advocacy can also be made use of because; it specifically focuses on the educational rights of children especially those students with disabilities.

Librarians have to create an enabling ground which will support people in expressing their views and concerns, access information and services, defend and promote their rights by advocating for them.

Use of the Internet

Groups involved in advocacy work have been using the Internet to accomplish organizational goals. It has been argued that the Internet helps to increase the speed, reach and effectiveness of advocacy-related communication as well as mobilization efforts. Not only that, it has been said that internet is one of the most important needed resources any library should acquire

Librarianship and Human Right

Librarians, both individually and collectively can engage with human rights issues as they pertain to libraries and the communities they serve: against censorship and discrimination; and in support of the rights of immigrants, cultural minorities, poor people, the homeless and unemployed, people with disabilities, children and young adults, older adults, those who are illiterate, and the imprisoned. For example in the issue of child abuse, librarians in that area can champion the fighting for the right of the victim. Librarians also protect human rights by developing diverse collections, programs and services, and preserving cultural and historical records.

Librarians can also champion an aspect which concerns the human right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to access and share information and ideas. Librarians also can protect other human rights like freedom of thought, conscience and religion peaceful assembly and association, confidentiality, privacy, education, and participation in the cultural life of the community.

Librarians protect and promote human rights on a societal level, serving as a cornerstone of democracy by helping people find quality information and develop the information literacy skills needed to be informed citizens and full participants in society. They can also protect democracy by promoting transparency in government, informing people about their rights and benefits, providing programs on civic issues, and offering free meeting spaces for community organizations.

Librarians protect and promote human rights on an individual level by respecting and protecting the right to free and equitable access to information for all and providing resources for personal enrichment and growth. This is because, librarianship value and support the development of each person.

Ways through which librarians can reach their community

An exhibition, in the most general sense, is an organised presentation and display of a selection of items. In practice, *exhibitions* usually occur within a cultural or educational setting such as a museum, art gallery, park, library, exhibition hall, or World's fairs.

Librarians can choose to use exhibition in meeting the information needs of their library community.

MASS MEDIA/SOCIAL MEDIA

The use of mass media by librarians in sensitising the community use will yield positive result because a well-focused mass media campaign, or live-theatre production has the potential to contribute successfully to community education. Mass media are amplifying factors in the society which inform people about happenings in and around them.

Television documentary is another medium that can be used because it aims at performing some functions of the media with the basic objective of creating more awareness about the happenings in the society because it gives facts and records about various issues and events. According to Uyo (1987), documentaries intensively and extensively dwell on relevant subjects using real people, situations and events.

MARKET OUTREACH

Some market women that were interviewed, when they were asked to suggest possible ways of sensitizing the market women of child abuse suggested market out reach. According to some market women, market outreach is one of the most effective ways of reaching traders since they find it difficult to leave their shops for the library. They went further in saying that most churches use this same approach to reach the traders that find it difficult to go to church. Books on trading can be taken to them in market places.

FLYER / HANBILL / POSTCARDS / POSTERS

These are another effective and fast ways of sensitization, they are also less expensive. They are in form of paper advertisement intended for wide distribution and typically posted or distributed in public places, handed out to individuals, attached to a wall or vertical surface or sent through the mail. They may be either wholly graphical or wholly text, they are designed to be both eye-catching and informative. Distribution of these materials to the populace will also go a long way. Since they are less expensive librarians can print as many as possible so that they can be found or seen in nook and cranny of the environment.

Promote Programs in School

Teaching children, parents and teachers rudiment in librarianship can help to inculcate reading culture. School is the third place a child finds his or herself in life and active hours of a child (7am-3pm) are spent in the school and teachers teach the children basic things of life at early age. This is the reason why schools should be one of the places where librarians should render their services when it comes to community librarianship. Pictures, dramas, exhibitions, debates, film shows, tours to rehabilitation centres, storytelling, social movement, etc. can be employed by a Librarian in driving home points. Schools should be encouraged to acquire books that are relevant to children.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the relevance of community librarianship and access to information in rural areas. Information is key to the development of any nation and for the third world countries that are characterized by rural societies to develop, community librarianship must

be paramount and the public libraries must make sure that information is available to all seekers in our rural areas. It is believed that if public libraries can effectively and efficiently carry out community librarianship, it will make information to be accessible to all categories of information seekers in our rural society.

Recommendations

- Government should fund our public libraries more adequately;
- Barefoot librarians should be redeployed to all our rural areas;
- Mobile libraries should be established by the government in all our towns and villages where we do not have public libraries;
- Community chiefs and leaders should assist the government in the provision of land and building for the establishment of libraries and information centers;
- There should be training and retraining of librarians to meet global best practices in community librarianship.

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