BRIDGING THE INFORMATION GAP FOR DISADVANTAGED AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES: EXPERIENCES OF THE NAMIBIAN REGIONAL LIBRARY

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Abstract

The Government of Namibia's Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, with funding from the Government of the United States of America's Millennium Challenge Account, Namibia, built three regional libraries towards the attainment of the country's vision 2030. The libraries were built in areas selected for poor learner's outcome and other social issues. Omaheke region has the second lowest literacy levels in Namibia. Gobabis the Omaheke capital is number three on the scale of towns with the most children living on the streets. Ohangwena region leads others when it comes to teenage pregnancy, HIV and drug abuse. Oshana region the capital of the northern region is the most densely populated region in the northern part of Namibia. Namibia's vision is for each of its fourteen regions to have a regional information hub equipped with current information and the latest information communication technology that addresses the community's lifelong learning needs. The goal of each regional library is to have regionally based multi-tiered library services and programs that will meet the immediate and long term needs of the residents through the provision of lifelong learning programmes. The majority of the people in Namibia live in far remote areas and their means to access information and library services are very limited. The three regional libraries each have a mobile library equipped with ICT equipment to address this challenge by taking the services to the people. This paper will look at the operations of the Omaheke Regional Library (ORL) and the impact library services will have on the lives of these communities.

Keywords: Namibia Regional Libraries; Marginalized communities; lifelong learning; library; ICT services; Omaheke regional library.

1. Introduction

ORL opened in November 2015 to provide information services and resources to the people of Omaheke. ICT services are the most popular services, with youth accessing the WIFI after hours.

2. Background

In 2004, Namibia formulated Vision 2030 with the goal "to improve the quality of life of the people of Namibia to the level of their counterparts in the developed world by 2030." The vision has the following eight themes:

- Inequality and Social Welfare;
- Human Resources Development and Institutional Capacity Building;
- Macro-economic issues;
- Population, Health and Development;
- Namibia's Natural Resources Sector;
- Knowledge, Information and Technology; and
- Factors of the External Environment.

These themes would ensure the vision promoted "a diversified, open market economy, with a resource-based industrial sector and commercial agriculture, placing great emphasis on skills development." Skills development would come through an "integrated, unified, flexible and high quality education and training system that prepared Namibian learners to operate in a rapidly changing global environment." The Government of Namibia envisioned that "By 2030, Namibia will be a just, moral, tolerant and safe society with legislative, economic and social structures in place to eliminate marginalisation and ensure peace and equity between women and men, the diverse ethnic groups and people of different ages, interests and abilities." Namibian libraries' role in Vision 2030 is to provide library services and resources to ensure lifelong learning for all Namibians and thus support the second theme of human resources development through the provision of knowledge and information technology (theme seven).

In 2006, the Government of Namibia entered into an agreement with the United States Government through the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). One of the objectives of this agreement was that MCC would assist Namibia "to increase general competency levels of students at secondary level through improvements to existing education infrastructure and increasing the number of educational institutions" by constructing and furnishing three regional libraries in Oshana, Ohangwena and Omaheke.

Omaheke region has a population of 71 233 in total, 70% of the 8-13 years is enrolled in schools both rural and urban, children 8 years and bellow have either lost one parent or both, thus 9% of this population are orphans. The region has a 65.2% of economically active population from the age of 15 and above while a 51.6% is economically inactive (Omaheke census regional profile 211, 3, 27-30).

Omaheke region has the second lowest literacy levels in Namibia, Gobabis the Omaheke capital is number three on the scale of towns with the most children living on the streets. Omaheke scattered and diverse population lives on farms and villages far from each other, the bigger town villages are 200 kilometers or more away from Gobabis town where the regional study resource center is situated. The ethnicity of the region consists of Herero, Setswana, Damara-Nama, San and Namibians of European descent.

3. Omaheke Regional Library Services and Resources

Officially opened on the 25th November 2014 by the Minister of Education, Dr. David Namwandi, ORL is composed of the following:

Omaheke Regional Library Sections

- School Library Section
- User Services and Outreach Section
- Children's Library Section
- Business Information and Research Section
- Information Communication and Technology Section
- Archives and Records Management Section

Omaheke Region Community Libraries

- Ben Hur Community Library
- Leonardville Community Library
- Talismanus Community Learning and Development Centre

The three community libraries have been in existence before the establishment of the Regional Library. The fourth community library, Gobabis Community Library ceased to exist upon the establishment of ORL. The community libraries are part of the ORL. The focus of this paper is going to be on ORL, discussing the services offered by the library.

ORL is equipped with facilities and services for its users, from conference facilities, computers, internet access, WIFI, study area, discussion areas, media room, seminar room, computer laboratory equipped with 25 computers, business and research area, children's library equipped with books, computers, tables and chairs, play area, puppet show area, television as well as toilets meant for children. Open collection for fiction and non-fiction books which is divided into teenage and adult, secondary level and tertiary level, reference section, journals and newspapers, map room, waiting area, media area where you find audio books DVDs, CDs, and movies for all ages, computer cubicles, SME kiosks, staff room, store room, off-loading area, toilets, front desk, circulation, ICT center, records/archives storage room. With a staff compliment of 22, assigned in all different sections of the library is functioning well and services are provided.

Since it's opening, the Omaheke regional library has received about 47 300adult users visiting the library, 11 632 junior users who had visited the library and 2433 registered users. Adults visit the library to borrow books, and those from the age of 56-70 borrow fiction books mostly while users aged between 35-55 borrow business, accounting, cook books, do it yourself books and sewing books. The library receive different types of users on a daily basis such as; researchers who come to research on different topics, teachers, small business owners. The teenagers mostly use the library for internet purposes social networks with the most commonly used being YOU TUBE, Facebook, twitter, other internet usage play online games, research on school projects, tertiary research, the cubical mostly used for watching movies, listening to music, listening audio books, videos, designing of advertisement posters, cultural groups watch dance videos and do practice as well as compilation of music beats and songs. Teenagers and juniors come to do their homework, study and play.

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3.1 School Library Section

Omaheke Region has 43 schools, of which only 22 have functional school libraries. MCA renovated three school libraries in an agreement which would see the Namibian government providing a librarian and a library assistant for each of these three libraries. ORL's role is to provide support to schools through teachers and training librarians, promoting reading amongst the children and ensuring each library has enough curriculum related books and computers for the children.

Basic Information Science (BIS) or Information Communication (IC) is a required subject teaching school children about libraries, use of information resources (searching and referencing) and the role of computers in education. ORL has run three training workshops for principals and teachers on the importance of BIS and how to teach BIS.

Readathon, an annual international event used to fundraise for children's books, is used in Namibia to inculcate a reading culture among children. ORL's Readathon celebrations focused on children displaying the importance of reading through poems, drama and reading. Schools not invited to participate at the library event were encouraged to spend the day celebrating the joy of reading and share through reports, activities that took place.

3.2 User Education and Outreach Services

Users service and outreach section provides support service to the in-house research to users, guidance on library policies, orientation to users on usage of the library, the staff provides support using symphony OPAC for easy access of materials by making information available to users, through the process of cataloguing library materials, lending out materials, registering users, and capturing of users to easily identify and access user records into the system. Promoting, marketing and encouraging the usage of library service and materials, some of the activities are mostly on homework help with secondary and tertiary education users, information awareness activities; HIV/AIDS week, Independence day, Easter week, reading club, literacy week, tobacco day. The library houses a collection of 15000 books, and 7542 has been catalogued into the system.
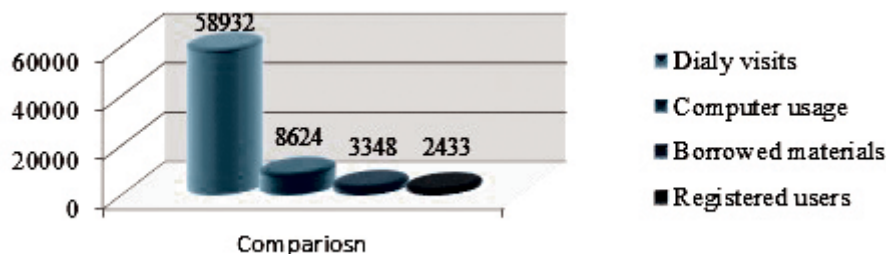

Figure 1 Daily visits compared to other activities done in the library

Figure 1 illustrates a comparison of visits to the activities done in the library on a daily basis. The graph clearly indicates that there is a lot to be done to encourage and promote reading culture as well as registration to become members of the library thus utilize all the available services.

The mobile unit provides support to areas within Gobabis but far from the library or due to other circumstances the community cannot physically make use of the library (the focus is on

the business women who spend their entire days selling at the market, old age homes, children living on the streets and prisoners), schools and communities outside Gobabis. The region has 2 functional community libraries, therefore 60% of the community lives in remote areas and have no access to libraries and the outreach program made 41 visits from January 2015-January 2016. The outreach program has 478 registered users from 6 different communities, the mobile unit bridges the distance by offering library services to remote/far areas. Basic computer training, movies for the old and young, books, newspapers& magazines, typing, photocopying, internet access, printing , storytelling, academic research, local needs such as farming materials, puzzle games are some of the services provided in outreach programs. By motivating and encouraging the usage of these different services/materials it could improve living conditions of community members just by knowing how to read, self-development.

3.3 Children's Library Section

The section serves users from the age of 0-12 years and those in primary school. Most of the activities are to promote reading culture through reading programs for children to improve reading skills and build confidence at a younger age especially at primary school level. Engaging in puzzle games to support and improve children's decision making as well as to identify and differentiate objects, e.g. cow from a dog. Training young users at a young age on how to use a computer, to understand the purpose of a computer and its function and how they work, to be able to type, read and research. Thirty children have been trained in basic computer skills.

There are different activities carried out by the children's library service, the staff have a range of activities. These include outreach to pre-school with books, puzzle games and computers. In the library learners have access to homework help, computer training, puppet show, Easter egg hunt, reading, computer games, Easter egg painting, puzzle games, movie hour, spelling sessions, chess club, storytelling, homework hour, video games, outdoor games and math quiz.

Learners from day care centers and schools have been orientated on the library activities and services offered, including story reading sessions and academic computer activities. Children with low literacy skills in English were given picture books to formulate stories from the images. Most popular homework that children come to research is; math, conservation of natural resources, Namibian independence, soil erosion, science projects, agriculture and social studies.

3.4 Business Information and Research Section

This section focuses on giving Small Medium Enterprises (SME), unemployed youth, collaboration with ministries, parastatal, and NGOs for business and career development. This is done through:

- Basic computer training SME
- Government documents
- Workshops
    □ Starting a business,
    □ Investing your money
    □ Marketing skills
    □ Business development
- ICT: Computers usage, photocopying and scanning
- 1196 have used computers

The Business Information and Research Section is also in charge of the library's facilities for hire by the community. These have been used for wedding events, birthday events, church groups, cultural group meetings, sports club group meetings, youth club group meetings, organizational meetings as follows: workshops, training and interviews had served major events like the Education Act review, heritage and cultural review, annual planning for different ministry within the region, Ministry of health and Social Services two month training, Teacher's Resource Centres national meeting, Mandela Washington fellowship community meeting with the American Embassy, interviews for education positions in the region.

3.5 Information Communication Technology

The major activity of the computer center is to provide technical support service to all ICT equipment and activities in all community libraries, and school libraries within the region as well as the Omaheke community using the Omaheke regional library. 5935 users have used computers for tertiary/academic research, homework & school projects, entertainment purposes; Facebook, you tube and twitter. The center provides internet services, video conferencing, television, projectors, discussion forums and a computer lab for computer training offered to the community for free, the training runs into 3 phases; basic computer skills, intermediate and advanced. 189 community members have completed training in basic computer skills and have started with the intermediate classes. 26 women were trained in collaboration with UNESCO.

4. Challenges

Region size and population

Omaheke is a large region, and its population is scattered making information service provision difficult.

4.1 Opening hours

The library can only be opened between 9H00 – 17H00 Monday to Friday. This makes it inaccessible to workers.

4.2 Size and Infrastructure

The roads in Omaheke are gravel, some are sandy and this makes it difficult to reach the marginalized communities. During the rainy season, the roads become worse, and the impact on the vehicles renders them unusable and preventing services to these communities.

4.3 Staff

The large majority of library staff are qualified, but inexperienced in the field. This has had an impact on the quality of service available to the community. There is a shortage of librarians in Namibia and this impacts on the possibility of shift work.

4.4 Finance

ORL faces the financial challenges most libraries face. This impacts service provision and building maintenance.

4.5 Fragmented organizational structure

School libraries and librarians fall under a different division. ORL can only provide technical support and one hundred percent role in managing personnel and services.

5. Recommendations

ORL always strategizes to overcome challenges, using tactics such as having staff work during Saturdays and taking time off during the week, or amalgamating activities to reduce costs and collaborating with partners in areas needing unavailable expertise.

6. Conclusion

Since its opening Omaheke Regional Library has provides services to the community, and has become a popular source of information and resources for both adult and children. The Library will continue to expand its services with the establishment of community libraries in areas with marginaginalized community. The library is planning to recruit more experienced staff to improve on the quality of service provided to the community.

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