MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A CASE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN NAMIBIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper looks at the monitoring and evaluation of public libraries and examines a case of public libraries in Namibia regarding measuring the impact and identifying service gaps and the relevance of public libraries in the communities their serve. The study focus was on public libraries' impact on individuals, communities and social development. A survey was employed to collect data from respondents. Data was collected through hard copies and online questionnaires, to determine the effectiveness of library services. The findings reveal that libraries provide patrons with assistance regarding several activities, such as job applications and developing their CV writing skills, libraries assist learners with their homework, and offer ICT-related services.*

KEYWORDS: *public libraries, ISO 16439, impact, evaluation.*

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are under increasing pressure by users to create, demonstrate and present value to society, so that community members visualise public libraries at the intersection of vibrant communities and a strong democracy. In the library context, the Lyon Declaration IFLA (2014) identifies marginalised groups being the dominant users of public libraries, which should present activities, provide information, and develop literacy and other basic skills. Now, more than ever before, libraries are urged to shift away from providing services at the library, and rather focus on the impact of such services on community members. This has become important for libraries, because, as contributors to national development, libraries need to offer services and programmes that can benefit and change people's lives. Therefore, measuring the impact of libraries on communities has become an emerging field for public libraries in Namibia.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN NAMIBIA

Namibia Library and Archive Service (NLAS) is the custodian of a public library network of 62 public libraries and three regional libraries. National norms and standards have been introduced in public libraries, however, little information regarding performance and impact assessment exists to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of public libraries in the country. At a national level, NLAS collects monthly statistics from all public libraries. In addition, detailed reports of annual statistics are compiled for the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. Both methods capture sufficient information on the real impact of activities and programming of public libraries.

Since independence in 1990, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, through the Directorate of NLAS, has made concerted efforts to build or refurbish libraries in economically disadvantaged communities, with the main purpose of providing access to information, creating a culture of reading, and providing access to equitable information and services – free of charge – such as scanning, lending of books and access to electronic devices and the internet. Photocopying, faxing, emailing and are other services are offered at minimal cost to community members. Public libraries serve as information hubs, with the aim of improving the level of knowledge and skills, and the livelihoods, of community members, therefore, it has become important for libraries to select and organise needs-based resources and materials that meet user requirements. Libraries in Namibia also support cultural and social activities, clubs, youth forums and groups for the elderly

through the services and programmes they offer, like homework helper, writing clubs, short-story writing, chess competitions and Girl Guides, which are programmes that can enhance the lives of youngsters in communities. Farmers, health workers and small business enterprises are empowered with knowledge and skills to advance their professional status through information communication technology (ICT) training.

Community members value the library as a place that offers a space to find joy and personal growth through learning and expert assistance, relevant resources and research tools, content sharing and creation, and cultural enrichment, thus, the future of public libraries should not only reflect the diversity of its communities, but libraries should also become leaders of practicing inclusion at all levels.

The importance of libraries is reflected in the Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and development, which emphasises that "Access to information supports development by empowering people, especially marginalised people and those living in poverty" IFLA (2014). This statement emphasises how important it has become to demonstrate the value of libraries to communities. Consequently, it has become necessary for libraries to enrich the cultural identity and expression of community members, and now, more than ever, libraries must ensure accountability, transparency, participation and skills development of staff members and community members.

THE PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

NLAS envisions a future in which public libraries serve as the intersection of vibrant communities and a strong democracy. This can only be realised if the ever-expanding value of public libraries is acknowledged and accepted. The following objectives are set for public libraries:

- To strengthen and enhance their contributions to communities;
- To define and support the transition of public libraries, so that they are more responsive to and reflective of community needs;
- To provide learning opportunities for community members, especially the youth and entrepreneurs;
- To increase awareness and the effectiveness of public libraries through advocacy by using manuals/ guidelines to create new tools in support of future advocacy efforts; and
- To promote continuous professional development for effective and efficient service delivery in libraries.

Library statistics that are collected as indicators of development and that may be used to achieve aspects of impact include the number of registered users, the number of ICT users, and usage and user statistics, measured over time. Statistics may show whether and how frequently particular individuals visit the library and access electronic resources or attend training sessions. When the numbers of users increase, it might be deduced that value or impact is being derived from these activities.
Information literacy is defined by ISO 16439 (ISO 2014, 50) as,

> *more wide-ranging than knowing how to use a library, but an aspect of lifelong learning that refers to attributes of people who are able to find, assess and use information wherever it may be located. This includes the skills for using information technology to access and retrieve information.*

Information literacy is one of the commonest ways libraries can make an observable impact on the knowledge or competencies of users. In order to determine the impact, ISO 16439 (2014) recommends that tests, whether standardised or designed for a specific purpose, should be done before and after any training that is presented, to establish whether a measurable difference in knowledge or skill has been achieved.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

Objectives of assessment

The scope of this paper is to discuss the link between planned activities and outputs and direct outcomes related to increasing access to information and knowledge, thereby assisting to eradicate poverty, as set out in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The paper will also give an indication of the benefits of the services and programmes offered by libraries that could bring about change and enrich people's lives, and help to encourage interventions that teach learners and youth community member's new skills and techniques for finding, evaluating and using information, to improve learning and personal development. These library services can contribute to fighting poverty and inequality in communities.

Surveys and questionnaires are the preferred method of assessing the impact of library services. This information was gathered through hard copies and online, and the data gathered was used to determine the effectiveness of library services. The survey contained a series of specially designed questions, with the aim of eliciting responses from respondents in relation to the benefits they received as a result of visiting the library. The questions were designed to cover the following areas:

- How do users acquire information, skills and knowledge?
- How is their work, learning and study supported?
- What are the benefits of the quiet, safe and comfortable place, where patrons can meet and communicate with others?
- What are the most popular services that are used in public libraries?

Best practices in monitoring and evaluation advise a focus on impact, rather than outcomes. Similarly, the modern library should not assess its value based on the number of services provided or the number of people who walk through the doors, but rather investigate the true, long-term, substantive impact the library has on the lives and livelihoods of community members Lipton (2012). Impact assessment theory is valuable for measuring the performance of public libraries worldwide Streatfield and Markless (2009a, 2009b); Huysmans and Oomes (2013); IFLA (2014).

ISO 16439 (2014, 13) defines the library's impact as "the influence of libraries and their services on individuals and/ or on society". Impact may be experienced by individuals or by the community at large ISO (2014, 14).

Effects of library impact

The impact of libraries can be divided into three main areas:

a)   Impact on the individual;
b)   Impact on the community; and
c)   Social impact.

For all three areas, the impact concerns change in individuals, groups of people, and society, and can generate economic value.

Impact on the individual

In many cases, it is the physical provision of resources and services that user's value in libraries. These resources and services could be those that are excessively expensive or unobtainable for many Namibians, such as internet access, computers, assistance in finding or applying for jobs, and a safe, quiet space. Public libraries offer a wide range of services, which include books and materials for recreational reading, reference books, study material and homework assistance for learners.

People do not always realise the role libraries play in stimulating local economies. Though patrons do not pay for library services, libraries play a key role in providing free internet, a workspace for telecommuters, assistance for people looking for employment opportunities, and even career and interview training. According to a survey done in Namibia, all 20 piloted libraries indicated that libraries assist their patrons with job applications and developing their CV writing skills, and assist learners with their homework. ICT facilities enable users to access information, print documents and receive and send documents electronically. One example provided by the survey is that patrons were assisted with the drafting, completing and sending of application forms for job vacancies, within a short space of time.

Other benefits the library provides relate to the social connection that is created between the visitor and the information professional, as well as other community members. This indicates that libraries are making a difference on the level of social cohesion.

Through the reading programme, many learners have learnt how to read with understanding and fluency. These programmes and services are seen as complementing collections and enabling library services to target specific groups to improve their social wellbeing. These activities include storytelling by elderly members of the community, spelling bee competitions, reading programmes, and cultural games that contribute to mental welfare and development. Libraries play an important role in developing a reading culture amongst Namibian children. Public libraries provide learners with the opportunity to immerse themselves in books, audiobooks and online resources. Every year, public libraries and school libraries address the issue of reading during an annual Readathon. According to statistics, more learners participate in this event every year. Teachers share success stories related to the value of the support librarians and public libraries in Namibia provide. A primary school teacher testified thus about the life-changing scenarios that libraries are valued for:

> In a class of 40–45 learners, it is very difficult to attend to each and every learner and having so many slow learners in one class makes it impossible to attend to all. One particular learner could not read at all and was struggling to recognise the simplest words. The learner joined the library and during the course of the year her reading skills improved tremendously and she passed her grade with an average C Symbol.

The impact of public libraries on individuals is demonstrated by improvements in people's skills and competencies, changes in their attitudes and behaviour, increased success in their studies, or in research activities and output, and possibly also in enhanced career prospects and improvements in individual wellbeing.

At present, 40 public libraries in Namibia offer basic ICT training to community members so that they can improve their ICT skills. ICT services in libraries empower people, and can unlock a world of super-fast globalised communication and information networks. The question is, however, whether technology and ICT skills can solve the problem of poverty? Development requires a multi-layered approach that enables people to access their rights through influencing policy makers, and developing new methodology, tools and resources. Information and communication are at the heart of the process. People gain power through information, and effective communication can be seen as the key that can enable people to become more active participants in the development of their communities. Libraries have a collection of success stories about unemployed youth who joined the library for basic ICT training and, after training, establishing their own small businesses, or were appointed in promotional positions. These stories testify about the impact of such training on personal development. Entrepreneurs continue making use of the library, as a benchmark for their businesses.

Impact on the public library/community

Public libraries are essential components of communities. They provide not only books and banks of computers, but are still places where individuals gather to explore, interact, empower themselves and visualise. As front-line institutions that address the needs of and focus on a wide range of populations with particular needs, including seniors, veterans, and immigrants, and homeless, poor and illiterate members of society, the social impacts of libraries are mainly regarded as a function of public libraries. These impacts include increased experience of social inclusion and cohesion; participation in information and education, for example, free access to information; free internet access; support in education; increased awareness of local cultures (for example, through exhibitions) and the acknowledgement of cultural diversity. Libraries are esteemed providers of literature and sources of the printed word, which has the power to shape culture into transformation. Libraries countrywide connect people with ideas. Handicrafts, such as needlework, crochet, cooking, and knitting, and book discussions are well-known activities that bring users together to share their learning processes and moments of triumph.

Social impact

Many families and teachers rely on the library, as a partner, to provide important preschool reading and learning. Libraries cater for people with special needs and support them in developing a sense of equity and access. Libraries participate in providing information and education through early literacy services that contribute to long-term economic success. Libraries have expanded beyond their traditional story-time services, and are engaging in high-impact strategies with community partners. The support libraries provide through information on local culture and history, via exhibitions and trade fairs, is valued by communities.

Mobile library services are implemented by three regional libraries, to develop and improve the quality of life of citizens in remote areas. Mobile services involve a suitably equipped and reinforced vehicle/bus that visits schools and designated community points on a regular schedule with a resource collection that may be borrowed by learners, teachers, and community members. Users may access the internet free of charge during visits.

Libraries support cultural diversity among community members, by encouraging them to maintain their cultural heritage. Regular displays, role playing and games with children of different cultures are popular events that showcase the impact of libraries on society. These activities, in return, ensure that children know their past, experience their present moments and know where they are going.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Access to knowledge by visually impaired Namibians, and the role libraries can play, should be investigated. It will be essential to obtain information from a representative sample of community members. Special sensitivity will be required, since obtaining such information can be mistaken as discrimination. These participants could be invited to participate in investigations about their perceptions of the usefulness of the library.
- Needs assessments have to take into account future projections relating to the most disadvantaged communities, which have few or no resources? This measurement will blend in with the vision of libraries on equitable access to information for all regardless of status, education, race or religion. Users travel long distances to access information and other resources. Mobile library services are limited because of financial constraints, but they need to be reorganised to provide sufficient services.
- Public libraries have an urgent need for technical support from regional technicians.
- The evaluation results confirm that public libraries are optimally used for seeking information, to borrow books and access internet and ICT programs. However, opening hours are not sufficient. Patrons want to visit libraries at more convenient times. The assessment recommends giving special consideration to opening later in the day – mornings are not particularly busy – and staying open a little later, to improve access.

In this rapidly changing digital era, public libraries must contribute to changing communities; if they do not, then they are not doing the work they are supposed to do. That is why librarians need to take up the initiative to strengthen and empower communities and support the cultural lives of members of society.

CONCLUSION

Library services positively influence the skills and competencies, attitudes and behaviour of library users. The benefits that community members experience from using library services can be assessed in terms of knowledge gained, improved information literacy, academic or professional success, social inclusion and increases in individual wellbeing. Libraries facilitate development, not only by honouring people's right to information, but because they offer space, access to ICT and a connection with and access to cultural heritages.

ISO 16439 is a useful tool for suggesting approaches to doing impact assessments and it has demonstrated that it can serve as a guide to finding objective evidence on how to ensure that users are fully utilising and accessing information and other learning resources in public libraries. To quote a library user: "Libraries are safe havens to explore the world through the eyes of a book".

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