

COMMUNITY LIBRARIES: ROLES, SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF READING IN GHANA

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INTRODUCTION

In response to an expressed need by their clients, public libraries in Western countries introduced community information service to meet these needs. This was at a time when public library service was almost universally available in the western world. There was, however, the need to focus on certain segments of the community which required information to solve specific problems. This shift in emphasis of information provision took place at about the same time when the library profession started to move away from the traditional "functions" of public libraries to provide specific services for specific communities¹.

This paper attempts to look at the concept of community library or community information service and the role it is expected to play in the community. Emphasis is placed on how community libraries could help in the cultivation of the habit of reading and how it would promote quality education and enhance human resource development in Ghana. The issue of sustainability of community libraries in Ghana is also discussed.

THE CONCEPT

In 1980, the Library Association (UK)

defined community information services as: services which assist individuals and groups with daily problem-solving and with participation in the democratic process. The service concentrates on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs, and their rights². What this means is that the service is demand-driven and is determined by what the people themselves require in terms of the materials and the format of presentation.

In Kempsons' view, community information services should be firmly rooted in and responsive to the needs of the communities they serve³. There should therefore be close collaboration between the information professionals and the users- both actual and potential to ensure successful operation. It is therefore important that the people in the community are consulted in whatever decisions that are taken. This is central to the concept of community libraries in that remedial measures to solve or address problems should not be imposed from outside but discussed within the community preferably through the committee system.

The rationale for community libraries

lies essentially in their different sense of social purpose. They differ from traditional libraries because they are proactive in their sense of social purpose. The primary stimulus is humanitarian and its outcome is social intervention in support of a positive prejudice⁴.

Community libraries therefore serve a diverse population, that is, men, women, students, teachers, farmers, and small shopkeepers from many different religious, ethnic, social and economic groups. They also serve people with peculiar problems such as delinquents, health-related problems, the youth, and the physically and mentally disadvantaged people.

COMMUNITY LIBRARIES AND EDUCATION IN GHANA

For sometime now there has been a lot of concern expressed about the falling standards in the study and use of English language and consequently education in Ghana. This concern has been highlighted by parents, education authorities and examiners alike in various fora. The basic problem, however, is the undeveloped reading culture in the traditional Ghanaian socio-cultural environment. The stridency of the concern voiced in the media underscore the gravity of the problem and the need to arrest the situation without further delay. In combating the situation every possible means available should be employed. Libraries constitute one of the most important institutions capable of solving the problem. This paper however, dwells on community libraries and the role they can play in enhancing reading habit and the provision of

relevant information and facility for the total development of the community and the people. Again it is important to emphasize the need for community libraries because in Ghana most of the public libraries are sited in cities and bigger towns. These are evidently inaccessible to majority of the people who live in smaller towns and rural communities. Ideally every community should have a library.

ROLES

The normal traditional library services include the following: reference and lending services for both adults and children and extension services. The community library can do a lot to assist in the development of the community in particular and the country as a whole. Some of these activities are:

- (i) Provision of information relevant to the needs of individuals and organisations for self-improvement or achievement of organisational goals respectively;
- (ii) Information services for increased productivity. Farmers, mostly in the rural areas require information on new farming methods, farm inputs such as improved seedlings, credit facilities, how to market their products, hiring of equipment and current prices of their end products. These information can be provided by the community library;
- (iii) Assisting in the creation of sufficient awareness of an organisation's activities among the general public by displaying their publicity materials, social amenities and current government

- programmes;
- (iv) Provision of self-help packages to help solve problems of the community;
 - (v) Establishing resource file of all identifiable sources of information, both published and unpublished and making them accessible to all age groups in the community;
 - (vi) Another role that the community library can play in the development of the community is through outreach programmes. These programmes are fashioned out to reach out to those who don't use the library and/or who don't read, show them what the library has for them, demonstrate its value and versatility, and try to get them hooked. Such programmes tend to serve individuals who need attention, who want response to queries, and have special needs. Outreach programmes could be planned in conjunction with the media for publicity, religious organizations and other social agencies as collaborators. It would not be advisable for a library to embark on such exercise without adequate resources to support it;
 - (vii) Promoting readership awareness/encouragement of reading habits is also another important role that the community library can perform. Community libraries in Ghana can play a vital role in the promotion of reading habits to stem the tide of illiteracy that is gradually consolidating in the Ghanaian society.

tries, the cultivation of reading habit among school children, students of secondary and tertiary institutions is of grave concern to educators, teachers, parents and librarians. This is where community libraries can be of much help in encouraging reading habits among the population. A study was sponsored by the Canadian Organisation for Development through Education (CODE) in Ghana in 1996 to assess the impact of the Ejura community Library on the formation and retention of reading habits of children to age fifteen and adults with fewer than six years of education. The conclusion of the study was that the community library could be a force to reckon with in the education process of both literates and illiterates in the community. The study further revealed that reading habits can be sustained with an adequate supply of books, newspapers and magazines.

Community libraries in Ghana can use these methods to encourage reading habits among the youth especially:

- (i) Adaptation of stories into plays to be performed by the children/youth. As part of the outreach programmes of the community library, users could be encouraged to be part of a drama society and be introduced to books which could be used to enact plays. By so doing they will be encouraged to read the books;
- (ii) Story Telling: the purpose is to introduce children/youth to lesser known writers by selecting some titles and encouraging them to read themselves;

- (iii) Film Show, that is, books adapted for films should be shown to users and discussion on that done later. Prizes could be awarded to those who excel in the discussions or demonstrate that they have read the books;
- (iv) Community libraries could also organize Vacation Camps to encourage reading/hobbies and other skills inter-linked with it. For example, weaving, basketry, sculpturing so that their stay at the camp does not become boring. They should be given books on these crafts to read. The aim of this activity will be double-edged. Whilst encouraging them to read, they would at the same time be introduced to useful vocations;
- (v) Quiz, reading and spelling competitions based on selected books could also be introduced as part of the normal activities of the community libraries. These books should be selected by the population in relationship to their daily activities. Here again, prizes could be awarded to deserving readers.
- (vi) Community libraries can also set aside one week in the year for library week where their clientele will be introduced to the library and its services, and some of the materials that will be useful to them.
- (vii) Promotion of Book Clubs or Literacy Societies can also be encouraged by the community libraries in their drive to promote readership awareness and reading habit among the populace.

It is the view of the author that if these activities are undertaken either singly or in combination, it would go a long way to encourage reading habits not only among the youth but also the adult population. In a way this will help to stem the tide of the creeping adult illiteracy in Ghana.

THE ISSUE OF SUSTAINABILITY

Cost recovery is an important issue for sustainability. The issue of sustaining any enterprise is a very crucial one. We need to take it very seriously in order that our good intentions do not become fruitless at the end of the day. It is a common occurrence in most developing countries to launch programmes with a lot of fanfare only for them to collapse the morning after the launching. We did not probably take into consideration how to sustain the projects. In the era of donors funding most of our projects, this is likely to occur unless conscious effort is made at the beginning to have a sustainability plan.

There is therefore the need for community librarians and information specialists to create services which are market-led rather than offering services which are institution centred. Durrani has suggested that to be sustainable, information services should address the basic needs of the target groups, foster two-way communication, and operate according to the information habits of their users rather than the set ways of traditional librarianship or extension services⁵.

As a first step towards ensuring the

sustainability of community libraries, there is the need for full consultation and discussion with the community leaders on how issues relating to the provision of information in the community are handled before any action is taken. This approach will let them have a sense of belonging instead of seeing the library as an imposition from outside. The people benefiting from the community library will therefore have to take the decisions with the librarians or any other person acting as facilitators or implementers of the people's decision.

In order to sustain the services of community libraries in Ghana, external inputs should be kept to a minimum if possible. Too much dependency on external donor funding puts a lot of strain on the resources of the community when funding ceases. This is not to suggest that these inputs should not be accepted. By all means they should be welcomed but then the community should put in place a plan for sustaining the library once external inputs cease to come in. Here, a special levy could be instituted. Industries that have been established within the community can be levied or talked into making donations towards the activities of the library.

Most of the community libraries in Ghana are funded by the central government through either the public library service or the district assemblies. Government funding for libraries have been dwindling in real terms in recent years but the libraries need to survive in order to provide information for their

increasing number of clientele. As a means of cost recovery and to be sustainable, community libraries could operate as commercial entities. They could engage in the selling of stationery, provide postal and telecommunication services, secretarial and photocopying services and the rental of their conference rooms. This has been tried with a measure of success in the Phidim village of Nepal by the Rural Education and Development Inc. (READ), a non-profit corporation based in the United States. The emphasis is on creating the means for future support of the libraries in Nepal. READ wants to guarantee long life for these libraries, and to that end, requires that a mechanism be set in place to assure sustainability.

Another method that community libraries can use to ensure sustainability is to periodically conduct user needs study in order to find out whether the library is heading in the right direction and is also meeting the needs of the people. Being able to solve the problems that people face, the library has a greater likelihood of being sustainable.

Appeals for financial assistance from corporate bodies could also be used to generate funds for the library. This is more likely to be met when they are made by a body with an existing and recognized financial structure.

The Ghana Book Trust which works in partnership with the Canadian Organisation for Development through Education (CODE) to promote the formation and retention of reading habits among children to age 15 and adults

with six or fewer years of education is a very useful source for obtaining books for community libraries. It is being suggested that community libraries take advantage of the facility provided by the Ghana Book Trust to improve on the information delivery process and also to stock the libraries with up to date materials at affordable rates.

Conclusion

Community libraries require careful planning, organisation and management. The complexity of users served requires good leadership, team spirit and commitment on the part of their executors. To conclude, it must be stressed that the establishment of community libraries has implications for everybody in the community, that is, opinion leaders, students, workers, chiefs, and other identifiable organisations. The success of the library would require a great financial

outlay. Opinion leaders, chiefs and other group leaders in the community would need to educate, inform and encourage the members of the community to use the library; but above all the community members must have a commitment to use the facilities and services available at the library.

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