THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN PROMOTING READING

WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO KENYA

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INTRODUCTION

a) Definitions:

Definition for a library has changed with the times.
- In the early times, a library was defined as a place where books are kept.
- While some time later, it was considered a quiet place housing books where people went to read.
- Oxford Advanced learner’s dictionary defines it as a building in which collections of books are kept for people to read, study or borrow.
- According to the Kenya National Library Services Board Act (Cap. 225, Laws of Kenya), a library is defined as “an organized collection of printed books, periodicals or any graphic or audio-visual material to which a member of the public has access free of charge or on payment of fees or by virtue of being a member of an organization or institution”

All the above definitions associate the library with books. The arrival on the scene of non-book media or non-printed materials has certainly changed the definition of a library.

The present library is more concerned with information regardless of the form in which the information is contained. A book is just a channel through which information is transmitted. Other channels are audio-visual, electronic, microfilm, microfiche, etc.

The most important consideration is that the information must be recorded. This is because the library does not deal with oral or verbal information.
Author’s definition: In view of the foregoing, the author defines a library as an information centre where information is acquired, organized and disseminated to the people in need.

- For the purpose of this presentation, the library that will be the subject of discussion here is the public library complemented by the school library. The two libraries are charged with promotion of reading. The others such as law, university, research libraries, etc. cater for specialized groups of people whose major function has very little to do with reading for pleasure.

Unesco Public Library Manifesto, 1994 describes a public library as:

- “A living force for education, culture and information and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women.”

It defines a public library as:

- a local centre for information, making all kinds of information readily available to its users. The services are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of the age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language, or social status.

With regard to service provision, Unesco Manifesto states:

- The services of a public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language, or social status.
- Specific services must be provided for those users who cannot for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example, people with disabilities, or people in hospitals and prisons. (this statement has serious implication on copyright issues).

According to the Unesco Public Library Manifesto, the missions of the public library are:

- Creating and strengthening reading habits in children from early age
- Supporting both individual and self conducted education as well as formal education at all levels
- Stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and young people
- Promoting awareness of cultural heritage, appreciation of the arts, scientific achievements and innovations
- Providing access to cultural expressions of all performing arts
- Fostering inter-cultural dialogue and favouring cultural diversity
- Supporting the oral tradition
- Ensuring access for citizens to all sorts of community information
- Providing adequate information services to local enterprises, associations and interest groups
- Facilitating the development of information and computer literacy skills
- Supporting and participating in literacy activities and programmes for all age groups and initiating such activities if necessary
b) Objectives of a public library in Kenya

Kenya National Library Services, a public organization mandated to provide public library services in Kenya has the following two specific objectives that touch on promotion of reading habits:
- to participate and assist in campaigns for the eradication of illiteracy
- to stimulate public interest in books and to promote reading for knowledge, information and enjoyment

ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN PROMOTING READING

a) Priority should be given to children
- To inculcate a reading culture, priority should be given to children by providing materials that attract their interest.
- Public library should liaise with school authorities to ascertain the kind of information services children will require. Where possible, the public library should complement the efforts made by school libraries
- Public library should conduct seminars and workshops for teachers and school librarians on the basics of providing information services to school children

b) Provide information materials that appeal to all categories of users
- The public library should identify its users and thereafter provide the materials that appeal to them
- Since the public library is “the Peoples University,” it should be open to all users starting from a street beggar to a university professor
- Library staff should avoid bias or self-censorship in acquiring information materials. Library Bill of Rights, 1948 and other related doctrines should be upheld.

c) Teachers should encourage effective use of the school library by children.
- To boost the use of library resources, teachers should provide assignments that require students to use library resources.
- Emphasis should be placed on student-centred as opposed to teacher-centred learning
- Students should learn how to use the various retrieval tools to access information

d) Information materials must be affordable.
- The materials must be pocket friendly to an average person
- The library must be able to afford purchasing or subscription
- The publishers should be considerate in pricing their products
- Costly materials put considerable pressure on library’s limited finances.

e) Library services should be extended to rural areas
- Library services should not be confined to the urban centres where the elites stay. Rather, it should be extended to rural areas where the majority of the population live.
- Extension of services assists to reduce the poverty level between the urban and rural population.
- In this regard, the present initiative by KNLS to reach the rural population through the book mobile, community library services, camel library services is appreciated.

f) **Library staff must be impartial in providing services**
- They should be self-motivated. Ill-motivated staff can be a disaster in discharging services particularly to children who need to be motivated to read.
- Library management should be particular about the kind of staff they recruit
- The staff should have been “called” into the library profession, the same way priests, medical doctors and nurses are called!
- Authorities should ensure that library staff are appropriately motivated by way of training, compensated and their contribution appreciated

g) **The public library should mount book exhibits and displays**
- These help to show the range of information materials available in the library for usage
- They help to publicize the new materials acquired in the library
- They bring new materials to the attention of users. In so doing, they act as a form of current awareness service

h) **Book Fairs**
   Unlike book exhibits, a book fair is a bigger event. It can be organized with assistance of book publishers and suppliers.
   - The exhibitors normally pay a fee to display their materials and in so doing, it can serve a source of revenue for the public library.
   - It draws the public to arrange of materials available on the market. Schools, institutions of higher learning, the general public are informed of what is in the market.
   - It brings together across section of people, namely, students, library staff, members of the community, etc.
   - Materials from the fair can be donated to the hosting library for use by clients.

i) **Book Clubs**
   - They bring together people who have interest in reading for pleasure.
   - They meet frequently to exchange ideas on areas of their reading interest

j) **Discussion Groups**
   - This is similar to the Internet discussion groups. Here people meet to discuss emerging topics such as constitutional review, etc. They may use the library to boost their understanding of the topics discussed.
k) Public Speakers
- The library may invite prominent personalities to talk to library users on topical issues. These could be politicians, lecturers, religious leaders, etc.
- In such presentations, the presenter could make reference to some information materials which listeners could turn to after the presentation.

l) Story Telling for Children
- They public library could invite people to present folk tales to children.
- After the session, children are referred to similar stories in the books in the library.

m) Reading Tents.
- The library may from time to time in conjunction with book publishers conduct this programme to encourage children to read for pleasure.
- It can also assist to expose people to new information materials.

CHALLENGES FACED BY LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING READING

a) Inadequate funding for libraries. Many public libraries on the African continent are under funded. Under funding results from low priority accorded libraries and in particular, public libraries by decision makers in the government. Much of what is given to libraries ends up paying for staff salaries with practically nothing left to purchase information materials.

b) Irrelevant and out dated materials is the order of the day in public libraries. Many public libraries in Africa and indeed, developing countries are flooded with irrelevant and outdated materials that do not appeal to readers. If libraries are to promote reading for pleasure, the materials must be relevant, informative and interesting to read.

c) Reliance on unsolicited donations. Many school and public libraries on the continent have found solace in materials donated from the developed world. Much as these materials may be welcome because of scarcity, majority of these materials are not suitable for use in Africa. Animals such as reindeers, bears, seals, etc., mentioned in some story books from the west are alien in Africa! For materials donated by local publishers, majority comprise titles that have failed to sell. Some comprise materials left unsold resulting from change of the curriculum. Rather than destroy the materials, many publishers opt to donate them to schools and libraries to be seen to be charitable.

d) Reluctance by publishers to produce materials outside school textbooks. Publishers and writers in Kenya are more concerned about producing school books to meet the needs of the school curriculum. Very few venture into general reading materials. School books are preferred because of the huge demand emanating from children in primary and secondary schools.
e) **The school curriculum is examination-centered.** In many African countries including Kenya, the school curriculum is centered towards passing exams than preparing children to be independent thinkers. This is because “good things” are centered on obtaining good grades in exams. These include securing good courses in a university, obtaining a good job or training, etc. Teachers are thus compelled to grill students specifically to come up with good grades. Private schools are particularly noted for this malpractice to guarantee them steady student enrolment. Reading for pleasure is forgotten. By the time students leave such institutions, they are mentally fatigued and have no liking for leisure reading.

f) **Provide Free Library services.** Unesco Public Library Manifesto advocates provision of free library services. This is one way we can promote reading for pleasure. Charging patrons scares them as many patrons may not have the financial ability to pay fees. Furthermore, many people in the rural areas live below the poverty level. In Kenya, the recent policy by KNLS to charge fee for whatever reasons has had a negative impact on the use of its services. A study needs to be carried out to ascertain this impact. Charging widens the gap between the information rich and information poor; the have and have-nots.

g) **User-unfriendly copyright legislations.** In a number of African countries including Kenya, copyright laws are biased towards protecting copyright owners as opposed to striking a balance between the rights holders and the users or the public. Such laws make it hard for users to benefit fully from copyrighted works. In Kenya, the following biases can be noted:

- The Kenya Copyright Board which is supposed to comprise all stakeholders in the publishing industry, is heavily dominated by the rights holders. There is no single representative from the library fraternity and yet librarians’ association is one of the oldest information-related groups in Kenya founded in 1956.

- The chair of the Kenya Copyright Board has since its establishment in 2001, been headed by rights holders. The present chair of the Board, for instance, is a prominent publisher. The interests of the library and its users cannot be taken seriously, when the Board’s chair is biased. This is so because publishers in Kenya have always criticized librarians for supporting controlled document reproduction and lending of information materials. They argue that the practice eats into their profits.

- When it comes to reviewing the present legislation, Kenya Copyright Board consults more with the rights holders and less with information users.

- The Exceptions and Limitations contained in the Copyright Act, 2001 do not adequately cater for the needs of libraries. The amendments to the Act being proposed are no where nearer those existing in neighbouring countries.
- Although the law empowers the Board to regulate and monitor Collective Management Organisations (CMOs), it does not monitor how they collect reproduction fee. It is a common practice for CMOs to collect fees from people and organizations, mainly libraries that are exempted by the law. When librarians protest this, the Board does not come out to assist them or clarify the situation.

CONCLUSION

A reading society is no doubt an informed society. We cannot be considered a reading society if our young generation does not take serious interest in reading. The reading we are referring to here is reading for pleasure. Reading based on passing exams is not reading at all since the practice is likely to disappear after the exam results are announced. To inculcate a reading culture, reading should be started right at the beginning possibly in a nursery school and should be carried out through one’s life.

It is possible for the public library to promote reading as a life long hobby. However this can only be done if all of us support the library in this endeavour. All of us stand to benefit from an enlighten society. The government will have an informed citizenry to govern; the employers will have an educated and skilled labour to employ at reasonable cost; and the publishers will have an enthusiastic and ready market for their products. Let us all participate!

THANK YOU