Establishing community and school libraries: African Library Project experience

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Introduction

Libraries play a crucial role in developing children and society by providing access to information, promoting literacy and education, and fostering a love of reading and lifelong learning (Fourie and Meyer, 2016). Because libraries play a significant role in societal development, all governments should endeavour to make school and public libraries available and accessible to the public. In Africa, despite widespread recognition of the importance of libraries in the advancement of society, their state continues to be appalling; most children in developing countries do not have access to libraries due to factors like poverty, lack of infrastructure and low literacy rates (UNESCO, 2015). The few available public, community or school libraries are sparsely distributed and inadequate. According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (2015), there are about 320,000 public libraries worldwide, many of which are in developing countries. Furthermore, the few available libraries are underfunded, resulting in the inadequate collection, infrastructure, staffing and service provision (Lynch *et al.*, 2022; Young, 2021). This scenario undermines the fourth sustainable development goal, which aims to improve and provide quality education for all and promote lifelong learning opportunities (Lee, 2020). As such, the literacy levels and quality of education in developing countries have been continuously established to be lower than in developed countries.

To close this deficit, several community-based and non-governmental organization (NGO) initiatives have been launched at the international, continental, national and local levels to build libraries and raise literacy rates across many regions and nations (Field and Tran, 2018). Examples include the African Library Project (ALP), "Room to Read," "Just Be a Child," "Book Aid International" and professional organizations like the IFLA and the African Library and Information Associations and Institutions, which support librarians and information professionals in Africa and other regions.

Within this framework, the ALP, an American NGO, was started in 2005 with the mission of assisting schools and communities in establishing and operating small sustainable school and community libraries in Africa. Since its inception in 2005, ALP has partnered with more than 1,500 partners to ship more than 3,883,082 books to 3,762 community and school libraries in 13 countries: Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Kenya and Uganda (African Library Project, 2023).

In the ALP, there are five levels where different players work together to complete the project; the board makes the project's strategic decisions of directors; the book drive organizers (BDOs) in the USA and Canada, who are involved in the mobilization of funds and books; the host country coordinators, whose teams make arrangements to clear and ship the readers, train librarians and monitor use; the benefiting school or community, which is expected to establish space, time and personnel to set up the library and run the library; and the end user, who is the reader of the resources. Through this project, ALP collaborates with individuals, schools and organizations to promote literacy by providing approximately 1,000 books, periodicals and other media for students, teachers, school staff and community members in community libraries; and by training and supporting volunteers in schools and communities to work as librarians and literacy ambassadors who promote the use and growth of libraries in their communities.

Problem statement

The number of public, school and community libraries in developing countries is still low compared to the global average, especially in developed countries. This is primarily due to insufficient educational infrastructure and resources for quality education. Furthermore, there are limited literacy programs that would allow adults who did not receive an education as children to acquire literacy skills later in life. Because of this, the need to have more Sound public and community libraries to promote literacy, provide access to information, support education and learning organizations and foster community development is likely to continue growing, and thus, attract more players in the industry. Even though many governments, organizations and individuals are involved in establishing school and community libraries, no particular framework works best in all circumstances. The ALP was established and has since accrued a lot of experiences that can inform the practice and legal framework of establishing, running and managing a school or community librarian. This paper sought to identify and share the best practices for the project.

Methodology

The study was based on secondary data documented by the project since its inception and the experience gained by the authors in implementing the project in Kenya. The authors have been involved in the establishment of over 200 small libraries in schools and