
The Role of Libraries in Contemporary African Society

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on library development in contemporary African society. A discussion of library development in the context of countries now enjoying rapid economic development is attempted here. Focusing on countries undergoing rapid economic development brings an alternative perspective to an analysis of library development in Africa and helps us to understand not only what is lacking but also what is going well as a basis for future development. The paper is divided into three parts: one that considers the contemporary landscape of librarianship in Africa; one that describes the characteristics of African society; and one that concerns the major role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have played in the renaissance of libraries in Africa. Several drivers of change in African library development stand out—most notably: 1) the achievement of stronger economic circumstances; 2) the increased prevalence of ICTs and access to the internet; 3) expanded public awareness of the value of libraries in society; and 4) partnership between the new generation of government leaders and partner agencies that are more focused on social impact than maintaining influence and dominance.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is often regarded as a country rather than as a collection of fifty-three different countries, each with its own individual character and destiny. The most significant development in the history of contemporary Africa is that more than twenty of its countries have seen dramatic economic improvement, with growth rates averaging 5–7 percent of annual GDP. Such countries, however, tend not to appear in the international media,

which instead habitually sensationalizes the story of a continent in deep trouble. The story of librarianship in Africa has often been written along similar lines. There are, of course, several countries in Africa where librarianship is faring very poorly because of economic collapse or civil wars or where religious and ethnic tyranny has overcome democracy.

There is, however, another side to the African story that is told less often. Currently, the socioeconomic climate of many African countries is very positive. Such states have experienced rapid social, cultural, and economic development. The story of librarianship has often mirrored this development within individual countries. This paper relates the story of recent efforts to cocreate a vibrant form of librarianship in African countries that are rapidly developing; it outlines the factors that explain why some countries are on a fast track toward development. The rise of librarianship in African countries from a colonial past where libraries were exclusive entities toward its basis in the concept of the library as a popular and relevant community institution is also explained below. The final part of the paper is dedicated to an exploration of the role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) and internet-based library and information services (LIS) have played in the renaissance of librarianship in rapidly evolving African countries.

Understanding the recent history of African library development ought not to be constructed on missing information or a lack of resources; rather, insight can only be gained from what exists. This paper therefore, drawing on Orem (2002), is intended to provide a philosophical foundation of appreciative inquiry—appreciating success, however modest, on which African countries can continue to build for the future. The future of librarianship in Africa, which is a richly diverse continent with many countries and forms of librarianship, is promising.

FACTORS THAT DEFINE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY

The current state of librarianship in Africa partly depends on the current situation that individual African countries face as independent states. Often, however, discussions regarding librarianship in Africa have grouped all the continent's countries together, analyzing them as a unit in spite of the major differences and peculiarities that exist among them (Alemna, 1998; Lor & Britz, 2005; Mchombu, 1991). Of importance in understanding the state of librarianship in Africa is the degree of socioeconomic evolution that individual African countries have achieved to date. The contribution of LIS to national economic development has received scholarly attention (Alemna, 1998; Chisenga, 1999). It appears that one of the major drivers of library improvement in African countries is the provision of support by the Addis Ababa-based UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) through the CODI program (UNECA, 2003). For example, it has established a committee on Development Information, Knowledge,

Libraries and Information Services (CODI-KLIS) that advocates for knowledge management, policies, and strategies. The primary goals of CODI-KLIS are to raise awareness of the value of libraries, knowledge, and information to further economic growth and enhance human welfare, and facilitate the creation of information systems that facilitate economic production and cultural activity (UNECA, 2003, p. 17).

If libraries are able to demonstrate their vital importance to national economic advancement, they will succeed in raising their status in society. In turn, policymakers will regard them as a priority, which would lead to more resources being allocated to this vital sector (Mchombu, 1991; Sturges & Neill, 1990). There is, however, another important connection between libraries and economic development that is seldom explored. Alemna (1998) notes that governments of economically prosperous African nations are more likely to increase library funding, and that when there is an economic crisis, libraries suffer most (p. 70). The point raised by Alemna is borne out, to some extent, by the rapid advancement of librarianship in a number of countries in East, Central, West, and Southern Africa (Mchombu, 2014; Ocholla, 2009). Librarianship in such countries is enjoying a renaissance of unprecedented success.

The World Bank (2000) has identified strategies to assist sub-Saharan Africa in advancing in the twenty-first century, while acknowledging that Africa is a diverse region marked by both gains and losses. Its report identifies three factors that would have a rapid, positive impact on overall economic growth: 1) increased political participation and accountability; 2) ending cold war-era activity impacting African states; and 3) the availability of globalized ICTs (p. 10). The current situation in many countries in the sub-Saharan region indicates that many countries have taken full advantage of the suggestions offered by the World Bank. There is general consensus that many African economies are currently faring extremely well, with higher than expected rates of growth, something that was unthinkable a few decades ago. Numerous reports suggest that the speed of current economic development is sustainable and permanent. Redelet (2010) argues the change in fortune that many African countries in the sub-Saharan region are experiencing is the result of

- more democratic and accountable governments;
- more sensible economic policies;
- control over debt crises;
- new technologies; and
- a new generation of political, economic, and social leaders, dubbed “the cheetah generation.”

THE LANDSCAPE OF AFRICAN LIBRARIANSHIP

During the late 1970s to mid-'90s African libraries struggled as economies became stagnant and countries were forced to borrow financial resources

from international moneylenders, such as the IMF, whose stringent conditions included strict structural-adjustment programs (Alemna, 1998; Mchombu, 1991). Southern Africa was under the shadow of apartheid, and war raged in the sub-Saharan region during these decades, which meant that many of the countries in the southern part of Africa were forced to divert what scarce resources they had to funding military forces in support of the struggles for liberation. The region was also fraught with turmoil by the civil wars in the former Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, and also in the Congo (Darch, 1999). The relevance of the Eurocentric model of African librarianship was seriously challenged by the emergence of a new generation of librarians. Many of the libraries found in Africa during the period 1970 to 1990 had been created by the previous colonial governments (Amadi, 1981; Rosenberg, 1993).

Some of the most active agencies in the promotion of public and academic libraries included UNESCO and the British Council, both of which operated under the influence of Western thinking. In other words, the agencies operated under the assumption that libraries were a good thing to have. Rosenberg (1993) concludes that

it is therefore not surprising that, taking Kenya as typical of most countries of Africa south of the Sahara, public libraries in Africa have failed to grow and develop symbiotically with society, and that libraries have not played a significant role in the social development thinking of African governments. . . . From the historical point of view, we should not expect these governments to support the development of national library systems which were not of their making. Instead, the future of public librarianship might rather be in abandonment and creation of libraries according to need and initially at local and community levels. (p. 44)

Studies conducted in the mid-1990s showed that libraries tended to be used primarily by a highly educated African elite. In some cases, very low percentages of an African nation's total population reported frequent use of the public library system, and in one case, it was found that less than 5 percent of the population used public libraries at all (John-Okeke, 2009; Mchombu, 1991). Recent studies clearly show the growing popularity and awareness of public libraries in African countries, however. A study conducted by the Electronic Information for Libraries Public Library Innovation Program (EIFL-PLIP) in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe in 2011, for example, established that although they are small in size, contain limited collections, and have few resources at their disposal, public libraries are widely available in these countries. Their main focus remains on traditional services like book lending and providing spaces for students in which to study.

The participants in EIFL-PLIP's 2011 study indicated a high level of awareness of the role that libraries play in providing education and information, but they also lamented the limited availability of ICTs (table

1). Librarians also expressed that they had inadequate skills with ICT-related services, marketing, and advocacy. Because the study covered several countries, it showed a clear pattern of the benefits that users obtained from which public library services were available. These benefits included: accessing new skills and learning; gaining new ideas and interests; finding helpful information for school and learning; and having a dependable and safe place for studying and reading. Additional benefits are also listed in the table.

To some extent, the EIFL-PLIP study demonstrates the changing social attitudes toward libraries in Africa, but it more clearly emphasizes the changing role of libraries throughout the continent. One conclusion is that as libraries in Africa have become more relevant through the drive to fill societal needs for education and information, attitudes of people toward them become more favorable. This is, of course, coupled with the increasing levels of secondary and higher education in African society in general (Redelet, 2010). Other recent research has reached similar conclusions regarding the popularity of libraries in Africa, even while the problem of access persists. Insufficient patronage remains one of the thornier issues that libraries in Africa face. A study conducted in Namibia by Webb (2010) in one of Windhoek's poorest suburbs demonstrates that libraries have value in African people's lives, although most people do not live close enough to one in order to make use of what they offer:

Libraries play a part in people's lives as a source of information, but their more important role seems to be as a place for knowledge creation. People participating in the study indicated they studied and created knowledge about their school subjects, and people created information documents to help them find employment. The library provided a quiet space to think and the tools, photocopier, computer, to make employment documents. (p. 2)

These findings indicate the variegated roles that libraries play in the lives of people, specifically in the area of the cocreation of knowledge in poor communities with limited facilities where electricity, water, sanitation, and housing are major problems. Mchombu (2012) studied the Community Information Resource Center in Greenwell Matongo, which is also a poor suburb of Windhoek, and found that it was used extensively by young people for educational purposes and general ICT access, while adults used the center mainly for literacy classes and the photocopying of documents. The major factors hindering usage by adults was their lack of English-language skills and that the collection of information materials did not readily address the information needs of the poor community in which they lived.

Public libraries in Africa, therefore, need to move away from their traditional role of being a quiet place for study. Fairbairn (2012) concludes that most people view public libraries in such traditional terms as a place

Table 1. Benefits derived by users of libraries

	Kenya	Uganda	Tanzania	Ghana	Average (%)
Base sample	499	498	499	494	(total = 1990)
Develop new skills or learned something new (%)	90	93	92	84	90
Obtain new ideas and interests (%)	81	78	80	73	78
Obtain helpful information for school and learning (%)	67	71	80	72	73
Save time (%)	52	44	71	55	56
Enjoy the visits, feel comfortable in the library (%)	52	58	51	48	52
Obtain helpful information for health and well-being (%)	31	41	47	36	39
Make contact with people (%)	27	35	47	36	36
Obtain helpful information on business and commerce (%)	38	32	43	10	31
Obtain helpful information about the community (%)	26	30	59	9	31
Become better in a job (%)	24	31	23	5	21

Source: EIFL-PLIP, *Research Report: Perceptions of Public Libraries in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe* (2011).

for reading books. She argues for the need to utilize the internet and the skills of librarians in order to change lives and engage in community development: “The unique opportunity to reach people with vital information in areas such as agriculture, health, and employment and poverty reduction—in addition to education—is largely untapped” (p. 1). The call for librarianship in Africa to move toward a developmental phase and contribute more to community and national development is increasing in many African countries. Several papers delivered at the African Public Libraries Summit, as well as the Standing Conference of East, Central, and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL), attest to this growing trend. The papers delivered in these forums provide an opportunity to share best practices, develop new leaders, and strengthen local library associations.

Unlike public libraries in Africa, academic libraries throughout the continent have always had a distinct advantage when it comes to resources and social acceptability. We may conclude that these academic libraries offer a more advanced component of African librarianship than public libraries because scholars at universities are required to teach, research, and publish in refereed journals. According to Ocholla (2009), African universities are also compelled by their respective national governments to establish and maintain a library as a condition for accreditation. University libraries also tend to have the most qualified staff, as well as regular users—academic staff members, students, and researchers—all of whom need the information services offered by university libraries to succeed in their endeavors (Raju & Raju, 2010). Given this strong support base, it is

not surprising that university libraries are the securest libraries found in Africa.

ADVANCES IN ICT AND AFRICAN LIBRARIES

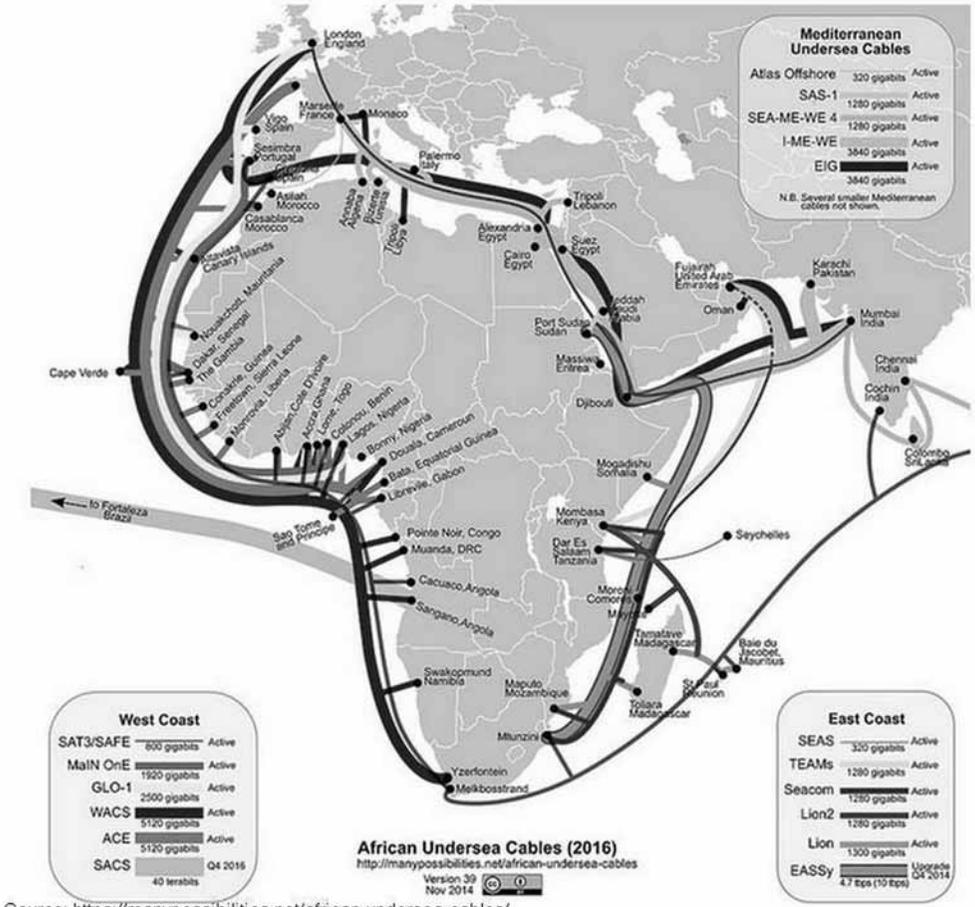
Many countries in Africa are rapidly progressing in the ICT sector, a change that has opened up new possibilities and challenges for libraries. The range of ICTs relevant to LIS is broad and includes both old and new technologies. Pride of place goes to computers, the internet, videos, digital content, mobile and smart phones, tablets, e-books and e-journals, open-access technologies and techniques, open-source software, e-learning, and fibre-optic cables, among other technologies (Chisenga, 1999; Mchombu, 2014; Mutula, 2007; Redelet, 2010). Mobile-phone technology has also shown tremendous growth in every African country, from a 1 percent subscription rate in 2001 to 54 percent in 2012, with several countries having achieved a 100 percent subscription rate (Macharia, 2014). In an article titled "Internet Access Is No Longer a Luxury," Macharia notes that Africa has undergone an impressive ICT revolution during the past fifteen years. In Kenya, for example, the mobile-phone subscription rate has increased from 33,000 in 2001 to 30 million subscribers in 2012. The African continent has also been linked up to the rest of the world by undersea (or submarine) fibre-optic cable. The result of using such cable systems is an increase in data transmission at reduced costs and time.

South Africa has played a key role in the development of these undersea cable systems in Africa. Mutula and Mostert (2010) identify several such systems:

- The Eastern Africa submarine cable system (EASSy)
- The West African cable system (WACS)
- The submarine cable system that connects Africa to India and Italy (SEACOM)
- Uhurunet, which connects South Africa to Europe

Macharia (2014) claims that there are over sixteen undersea fiber-optic cable systems connecting Africa and Europe, America, and Asia (fig. 1). In theory, such cable systems should reduce the costs of accessing the internet, thus providing libraries with opportunities to offer such service, and other value-added information services, at minimal cost. Macharia notes that before these undersea systems became available, internet service providers charged up to US\$2,300 per month for a basic satellite connection. The price of submarine-based cables is much lower, and the connection to information services is now available for less than a hundred dollars per month. Unfortunately, most African countries have not taken advantage of these lower costs by passing on the savings to consumers and libraries (Mutula & Mostert, 2010).

Given all the possibilities for libraries that are the result of the ICT revo-



Source: <https://manypossibilities.net/african-undersea-cables/>

Figure 1. African undersea cables (2016). Map courtesy of Steve Song.

lution, there is one big challenge. EIFL-PLIP’s 2011 study found that most library users, many with sophisticated skills in using technology, rated librarian competence as good or very good except in providing technology-related information services. Several African libraries are diligently addressing this shortcoming either with the assistance of partners or by working with their governments. EIFL has twenty-one ongoing projects that partner in Africa to address these information-services shortcomings in many countries, including Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, South Africa, and Zambia. The EIFL Public Library Innovation award was established to provide funding to libraries involved in ICT-related projects.

In Namibia and Tanzania, the respective national library systems,

which also run public and community libraries, are working closely with the Finnish Library Association to strengthen their ICT services as well as to train librarians in their provision. The Finnish, Namibian, and Tanzanian Libraries for Development project also provides for the expansion of community information services and has been very successful (Mcharazo, Kauaria, & Lahti, 2014). Most of the points raised here regarding how ICTs and internet access are catalysts for the rapid advancement of libraries in individual African countries are best illustrated by what is currently taking place in Namibia. In a 2014 speech by Namibian president Hifikepunye Pohamba at the opening of the Regional Study Resource Centers (RSRCs) in Oshana and Oshana, he pointed out that his government, in partnership with the US-funded Millennium Challenge Account (MCA-Namibia), has built three RSRCs, whose main goal is to address inequality in accessing knowledge resources in order to support the advancement of formerly marginalized sectors of the Namibian people. Another goal involves the long-term plan of transforming the country's economy into a knowledge-based one by 2030. The president noted that each RSRC provides access to over 35,000 books and has fully equipped computer laboratories to train and provide individuals with ICT proficiency and free internet access. President Pohamba further noted that all RSRCs have fully functioning video-conferencing facilities and conference halls for public lectures and community engagement; each center also has a children's library with computer-learning games, books, and puppet shows. Additionally, the RSRCs are meant to provide access to government information through an e-government portal. Two other services mentioned by the president during the opening ceremony are mobile libraries that will provide extensions to outlying rural areas, and community-assistance programs that will offer information regarding healthcare, agriculture, and small-business enterprises. The government of Namibia has committed itself to building similar facilities in all fourteen regions of the country, using government resources (Republic of Namibia, 2014).

In South Africa, which is one of Africa's ICT powerhouses, technology services in libraries received a boost from a Carnegie-funded project that ended in 2012 (Carnegie Corporation, n.d.). The grant enabled the creation of model libraries, including the implementation of extensive renovations, purchase of audio-visual equipment, installation of modern ICT equipment, and the provision of free WiFi to the public and an up-to-date book collection. The grant was given to a wide range of libraries throughout South Africa, including

- National Library of South Africa in Pretoria;
- Bessie Head Legal Deposit Library;
- Cape Town City Library;
- Johannesburg City Library;

- Khayelisha Township Libraries in Cape Town; and
- eThekweni Municipal Library in Durban.

Carnegie also provided a Higher Education and Libraries in Africa grant that was aimed at building information resources in countries experiencing economic growth and political stability in the sub-Saharan region, particularly Ghana, South Africa, and Uganda, because these countries' universities could most benefit from it.

Another organization that has provided support for strengthening information services in Africa is the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP). Several projects in Africa have benefited from INASP's support, which focuses more on academic libraries, including projects in digital libraries, the training of librarians in ICTs, and scholarly research information services (INASP, 2004).

At present, one of the major funders of ICTs in libraries throughout the world is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, including those in sub-Saharan Africa; the foundation is dedicated to improving ICT-based information services, creating awareness of public libraries, and enabling public libraries to provide free internet access (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.). A Kenyan e-books project has had a major impact on the communities in which the recipient libraries operate. Ruth Jemo, the librarian of Kakamega County, observed that "e-readers will give our patrons a big boost. We have students who come to the library every day to do their homework because they would not otherwise access books. They will now access course books as well as other reading material. Some of these children don't even have shoes, but they value reading and they come here every day." Additionally, Caroline Kayoro of Kenya National Library Services related that "the shelf life for a printed children's book in the library is six months. With e-readers children will have access to books for up to four years without replacements. If anything, they will add to the library of books. This is a major cost saving [strategy] for Kenya National Library Services" (Worldreader, 2014). While Kenya is one of the African countries whose economy is quickly developing, these statements could apply to any of the over twenty other African countries whose economies are improving, such as Botswana, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, South Africa, Senegal, or Ghana.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper has been library development in African countries at the present time, with reference to countries that are doing well economically. The main reason for taking this approach is that most authors on the subject tend to write about the continent from the perspective of what is lacking or missing in African librarianship. Using a modified model of appreciative inquiry suggested by Orem (2002), we argue that it

is more empowering to analyze library development in Africa through this perspective than it is to concentrate on economic shortcomings in specific countries, or than it is to generalize the experience of individual countries to the rest of the continent under the rubric “African librarianship.” In fact, African librarianship cannot reasonably be an item of discussion because conditions in individual countries vary so widely. It is, therefore, more accurate to speak of country-specific librarianship in the same way that we discuss, individually and specifically, British, French, or German librarianship.

The above discussion implies that the key drivers of change in librarianship in Africa consist of several factors. First, the availability of more resources as the economies of African countries improve has provided opportunities for all sectors to benefit. Improved economic resources require greater skills in fundraising and resource mobilization by LIS. The second driver is the prevalence of ICTs and the internet in rapidly developing African countries. The wide availability of ICTs has provided greater opportunities for libraries to offer improved, value-added information services and reach out to a new generation of users. But the need for librarians in most African countries to acquire better technical skills remains. The third driver of changes in librarianship in Africa has been the changing attitudes and high level of public awareness about libraries and their useful role in society, even for communities without a library of its own. Moreover, libraries throughout Africa are highly valued as a critical service. Part of the explanation for this is the change to libraries in becoming more community needs-driven and recognized as enhancing people’s lives. The challenge, however, remains that many communities do not have access to a library, which thereby renders fundraising skills and the ability to form partnerships important in addressing this shortcoming. The fourth driver of change has been the leadership of a new generation of highly educated librarians, who have been locally educated and have a greater ability to address local information needs. The major challenge here remains capacity building, particularly among this top leadership, in order to acquire the skills that will enable this new generation of librarians to perform as chief executive officers of national, public, and academic library services.

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