
NON-RESEARCH SECTION

Extending community library and information services to rural areas – the challenges that lie ahead

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This presentation¹ has been motivated by the plight of people living in rural or disadvantaged areas without access to basic infrastructure for library and information services. Most of the information was gathered through observation and personal discussions with colleagues and other interested people in this field. Keeping in mind that a greater percentage of the provincial population is predominantly based in rural areas without access to basic library and information service, it is important for us to concede that the challenge is quite enormous.

With the establishment of the democratic government, many opportunities were opened for agents of government to come up with policies and programmes of activities as to rationalization and re-allocation of services to rural or disadvantaged areas. Many things had happened and will continue through the efforts of these agencies or departments to redress the imbalances in services.

Often referred to as rural librarianship, the challenge to extend CLIS to rural areas in our province is one area of great concern to our profession, given the low level of services in those areas. This challenge will require active imagination and innovative ideas on the part of the profession to succeed. CLIS will have to compete with other basic services for the scarce social funding, i.e. water, roads, health, education, etc. One challenge for us is to show how Community Library and Information Services can raise the standard of living of ordinary rural people and ensure a better life for a community through its programmes and activities.

For another, it will be important for us as practitioners and interest groups in this field to do introspection into our activities to check if we have really done enough in reaching out to rural areas. It will be important to check what programme is required to ensure that sustainable and viable library and information service is extended to rural areas.

The fact that community libraries hardly exist in rural areas where poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are high should be seen as a starting point for us. It is therefore important to begin by understanding what community libraries are and how they feature in the solution of these problems.

Community libraries are community information centres. Their purpose is to provide the entire community with timely educational, informational, recreational and cultural information, documents or resources, in general or to specific users. They must provide cutting edge information, which must enable the community to participate meaningfully in their socio-economic development in a bid to provide a better life for all.

Information is of fundamental importance to the process of social and economic development. The quality of life of individuals and a nation is increasingly dependent on their capacity to absorb, act on and use information; information resources, skills and literacy are therefore essential to ensure that communities remain at the cutting edge of information (RDP, 1996, ANC). As the international community opens up to embrace South Africa, we must learn to compete on an equal footing with the developed nations. Sound information resources and skills bases are central to the process.

The above objectives indicate clearly in what role and where community information centres feature in this regard. Specific attention to poverty, illiteracy and unemployment will require that community information centres innovatively rethink their strategy of information service to rural areas. Information services will have to be easily comprehensible and relevant to their situation and help raise standards of living. Surely the situation will require more of physical exchange of information in many instances; thus the need for outreach programmes.

Like with other government programmes, the extension of community information centres to rural areas will definitely need a policy framework. The policy will have to detail issues relating to institutional objectives, user

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community or clientele, public participation, strength and weaknesses of the current system, funding, stakeholders, special programmes and projects for future development, models of community information centres, etc. Whatever programme we embark upon, all efforts should place emphasis on how to integrate activities with other government departments or agencies with similar objectives or common goals.

It will be difficult to pinpoint a specific model of community information centre as the most appropriate for every individual situation. However, from my personal observation of how schools were established in rural areas, a cluster model is my ideal for a start. In this model a cluster of communities within reach are serviced from one point. The one-community information centre is ideal in instances where the backlog in rationalization and reallocation of communication Library and Information Service imbalances is low.

The question of joint development of resources and resource sharing between and among government departments on matters of common interest is a key element to every development programme, including the financial constraints in social funding, and reiterate the need for this relationship. A good example would be a co-operative arrangement with the department of education for learning support materials for schools and ABET as well as for infrastructural development. The SMME's desk for the information needs of small businesses, as well as Government Communication and Information Service, might have a major role to play, to single out just a few.

The Directorate of Library and Heritage services will have to take a strong leadership role in co-ordinating the initiative and securing the commitment of other government departments or agencies with a common goal. The initiative should also seek to win support from business, CBO and NGO's, international aid and other interest organizations.

Obviously, funding is the key to the success of this process. Government policy and mechanisms of raising funds are crucial to the success of redressing the imbalances in development backlogs. However, government (national, provincial, district and local) funding alone may not be enough with the vast backlog of services; thus lobbying will come in handy in this regard.

LIASA will have to play an active role in lobbying for support and funding for such programmes, particularly for disadvantaged provinces. I think it is important for me to indicate that the effort of LIASA in this regard has been quite encouraging recently. That will help ensure the sustenance of the profession and association. It will be of essence to lobby district and local government to prioritise community libraries and information services in their integrated Development Plans.

The current digital divide between urban and rural areas is a drawback to the library profession. Technology will add value to services offered by community Information Centres, and can be the best way of accessing information for local economic development, government information, and recreational and educational purposes.

Fully resourced community information centres will definitely play a crucial role by positively influencing the lives of ordinary people in rural areas, thus raising the standards of living and improving the quality of life. It is therefore important to ensure that services are sustainable and well supported to enable them to carry on with improved services.

Collection development and management planning is vital for the process of extending community library and information services to rural areas. It will ensure that there is consistency in the supply of information services even for extended services. With a proper networking system, it will be easier to determine what library materials are available and where in the province, as well as to do a proper audit.

Training and development of human resources will determine how far we can successfully implement the extension of services to rural and disadvantaged areas. In-depth analysis of community information needs will give guidelines as to what sort of training and development is required. Academic institutions in the province can play a pivotal role in facilitating and conducting actual training development programmes as well as for research purposes.

In conclusion, the profession will have to carve its niche deep, and convincingly determine where community Library and Information Services feature in the pursuit of a better life for all, and how we can raise the standard of living and improve the quality of life, particularly of the disadvantaged communities.

The rationalization and reallocation of library and information services resources to previously disadvantaged areas to redress the imbalances of the past would put the public image of the profession in good standing if it succeeds. The implications are that we might seem to be supporting the current imbalances if we do not act decisively.

The views on this communiqué are personal and may not represent the ideas of any organization I am associated with in the profession. I would also like to invite comments and contributions on this issue, as it affects our profession.