

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

communities in Kenya. The secondary data analysed were obtained from the ALP website and the manual “How to Set Up and Run a Small Library in Africa,” published with the ALP.

Best practices from the African Library Project experience

ALP has had the chance to gain experience in practice, identify areas that need development and adopt improvements to make its operations more effective and efficient while building libraries in Africa. Some of the best practices that we can learn from the ALP’s way of doing things are:

1. Process of application and receiving books

Even though various stakeholders frequently use donations to start libraries in developing nations, the strategy has come under criticism due to some difficulties and gaps regarding accountability, monitoring and evaluation, the quality and applicability of the collection and the sustainability of the libraries, among other things (Sturges, 2013; Rath and Rath, 2014). The ALP has an elaborate process on how communities and schools can apply for a library, receive book donations, training and continued collaboration. Furthermore, the process of application and receiving book donations from ALPs has checks and balances at every stage to ensure that libraries get appropriate books. A rigorous procedure and set of guidelines are in place to ensure that the contribution is made specifically to the applicant’s demands, the collection is adequate and culturally acceptable and the libraries are sustainable. Most importantly, books are only given to a library that has expressed need through the application. The applicant must fill out a detailed application form.

All necessary details, like the demographics of the libraries and the type and quantity of books needed, must be captured through the application form. Furthermore, the application document provides for at least three people to write commitment letters and sign the documents indicating the roles they are willing to do as volunteer library committee members. This promotes communal ownership of the

project and facilitates continuity. After applications are received, the requests are matched with volunteer BDOs who collect books as per the expressed need in the application. Furthermore, The ALP provides detailed guidelines on the books to be collected and the fundraising process for the shipment cost. This assists in ensuring that the applicants receive an appropriate collection. Once the books are shipped and distributed in the libraries, those in charge are trained and issued with a reference manual to assist them in the day-to-day running of the library.

The thorough ALP application process helps ensure the project is implemented successfully, within budget, and to the satisfaction of all parties concerned. Despite the checks and balances in place, reviewing every book the BDOs acquire is occasionally impossible. As a result, the collection may sometimes be inappropriate regarding culture, language, money and situations, among other things. Although many schools and communities lack libraries, it is improper to give them unsolicited donations to them. It is essential to allow applicants to express their desire for donations. Borrowing from ALP experience, other organizations could raise awareness of their donations and permit libraries to freely use them to lessen the idea that donations are of little or no value or that people take them for granted.

2. Collaboration, partnership and volunteerism

Establishing and running a library requires a lot of resources in terms of expertise, funds, space and time commitment (Mojapelo, 2018). It is almost impossible for an individual or organization to work alone. To overcome this challenge, ALP has built strong partnerships, collaborations and teams of volunteers at virtually all levels to collect and purchase books, fundraise for money needed for programs like shipping the books, hosting the ALP Summit and running the office. Through partnerships and collaborations, ALP makes use of the expertise of volunteers, including members of the executive board, office staff, BDOs, in-country coordinators,

library committees and community/teacher librarians.

The BDOs are volunteers based in Canada and the USA and are tasked with collecting books and raising shipping costs. From the list of applications received by the coordinating partners, one library or library application is assigned to each of them. ALP collaborates with volunteer organizations like NGOs or universities in the participating African nations to plan and manage all in-country activities, such as locating, gathering and assessing library requests from communities and schools, arranging teacher librarian training, receiving the libraries from shipping agents, distributing them and conducting monitoring and evaluation of the distribution of the libraries, among other things. ALP stresses community ownership and involvement in library projects at the school or community level. The libraries must select 3–10 volunteers to serve on the committee throughout the application process. The library committee comprises educators, student librarians and citizens of the neighbourhood, and its role is to provide guidance on and support the expansion of the library.

The strong emphasis on partnerships, collaborations and volunteers has greatly enabled the ALP to bring together diverse resources, including financial, intellectual and human resources, and thus, do a lot with minimal resources. Using volunteers to manage a project has both advantages and downsides. Volunteers are not always as reliable as paid personnel. Some volunteers, such as teachers and community librarians, may not have the same experience or knowledge as paid professionals. They also take a lot of time and effort to arrange because they are ubiquitous. Other organizations can profit from the guidelines and practices used by ALP to form effective alliances, teams and volunteer teams because ALP has been doing it for a while.

3. Use of teacher and pupil librarians in the absence of professional librarians

According to Subramaniam *et al.* (2015), a library should have knowledgeable staff to help users find information and resources and offer other services. Unfortunately, many schools in

developing countries do not have professional librarians. To mitigate this gap, ALP encourages teacher or student librarians to assist in running and managing the libraries. A teacher librarian is someone who has both teaching and librarianship qualifications. However, this is not true in most African nations, including Kenya. Most librarians who work in schools are licensed teachers rather than librarians. They are typically teachers chosen by the head teacher to be in charge of the books, primarily government curriculum books, in the schools where we have teacher librarians.

Miller (2005) states that one of the significant obstacles to implementing information literacy in schools is that the majority of teachers and school administrators still do not comprehend the concept of information literacy and are not aware of the role that school and teacher librarians can play in the implementation process and in encouraging a reading culture in their students. ALP training aims to address this. In a simplified way, the training gives teachers the knowledge and skills to keep the library relevant and functional for years (Herring, 2007). Furthermore, the training advocates the selection and use of pupil librarians. These learners work in a school library to help maintain and organize the resources and assist with library events and programs, such as book clubs or author talks. They are usually selected for their love of books and reading and then trained by the teacher librarians. This inspires and empowers them to be literacy champions, ready to assist and guide young learners who love reading (O'Neill, 2010; Swinyard, 2017).

Although teacher librarians have been able to step in and assist where there are no professional librarians, the approach is faced with various challenges: the teacher librarians lack the specialized skills and expertise required to run a library professionally; since they have full teaching loads like other teachers, they have limited time and attention to the library, which can result in delays or poor services; for teacher librarians to work well, they may need more and more frequent training, support, and supervision to perform well; and, since most teacher librarians work as volunteers, they may have varying levels of commitment and

motivation; since they are a This can lead to inconsistent performance and results.

4. Capacity-building forums and materials for teacher/community librarians

Starting and running a library can be very demanding, particularly for someone with no formal librarianship training, as with teacher librarians. One requires a set of technical skills, like how to check out and in a book or complex skills like cataloguing and computer skills, among others. ALP offers forums and resources to help teachers gain the basic skills they need to set up and manage small libraries without professional librarians. ALP has published a simple, step-by-step manual that acts as a point of reference for teachers for all they need to do as teacher librarians. The ALP manual, titled "How to Set Up and Run a Small Library in Africa," has 19 chapters written in simple English and organized in a way that is easy to read and refer to. A copy is issued to each library and is also available online for those unable to get physical copies.

Before distributing libraries to schools and the community, ALP organizes workshops for at least two teachers and community librarians from each institution to provide them with the skills and knowledge needed to run a successful library program. Professional librarians usually facilitate the training through the ALP's local partners, and it usually takes a day or two, depending on the agenda. Overall, the ALP's teacher training program aims to equip teachers with the basic knowledge and skills necessary to establish and maintain a library that promotes literacy and education in their school or community. It is an effort to raise awareness about the importance of libraries. The short training is meant to assist them in developing the basic skills and knowledge required to use the new libraries effectively.

Furthermore, the ALP regularly holds summits that bring together all the stakeholders, such as educators, community leaders, librarians, in-country volunteers, book organizers, drive organizers, librarians and librarians in a participating country on a rotational basis. These summits provide a platform for

individuals and organizations to share their experiences, best practices and challenges in building and sustaining libraries in African communities. They also allow participants to learn about new developments and innovations in literacy and education. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, the summits help build a stronger network of support for literacy initiatives in Africa and facilitate collaboration and partnerships among organizations working towards a common goal, which can lead to more effective and sustainable efforts to promote literacy and education on the continent. Other activities during summits include all participants visiting established libraries, cultural displays and exhibits from the partner countries and a workshop for teacher librarians.

Even though the training has been simplified and supported by user guides, the one to seven days duration is insufficient to have meaningful sessions. Library science is a multidisciplinary field that covers a wide range of topics related to the organization, management and dissemination of information resources. To be well acquainted with all aspects of professional librarianship, one must pursue a much longer training such as a diploma, bachelor's, master's or even a PhD. It is also not cheap to facilitate the training process; ALP and local partners typically budget for the occasion. The teachers must also pay to travel to the training location. Because the books are already in the country, you are occasionally forced to decide whether to offer the libraries to the teachers who did not all show up for the training.

Conclusions

Improving literacy levels through provision of reading materials in developing countries requires a sustained effort from all stakeholders involved. The ALP has made a significant contribution to improving literacy rates in Africa, and their work has had a positive impact on many communities across the continent. The sustainable and community-driven approach used by ALP should be replicated by other organizations. By involving local communities in the process of establishing and maintaining libraries, the organization helps to build

long-term capacity and promote a culture of reading and learning. Despite the progress using these strategies, there may be opportunities for improvement, and ongoing efforts to evaluate and improve their programs will be important for achieving their goals.

Recommendations

- Libraries should be prioritized as a crucial resource for children's development in Africa, and governments and NGOs should devote a sizeable percentage of their budgets to creating libraries, enhancing the skills of library administrators and encouraging kids to read.
- To increase literacy levels to have a greater and more long-lasting impact, all stakeholders must collaborate, be innovative and use community-driven development initiatives in order for NGOs and governments working in Africa. This can involve media campaigns, community outreach programs and collaborations with schools and local organizations to raise awareness about the importance of literacy and promote reading culture.
- The use of teacher librarians in schools without professional librarians should be encouraged. However, there is a need to ensure that teacher librarianship is embedded in their training so that by the time they graduate, some or all teachers have the capacity to run school libraries.

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FURTHER READING

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