The Role of Librarians in National Development in Tanzania: Information Inclusion and Exclusion

Julius Tunsaje Tweve

Abstract

Public libraries are inclusive institutions created for everyone to equally and freely access information for educational, social and cultural development; indeed that is the essence of inclusion. However, this is not true because defining and identifying user inclusion is a difficult task due to the wide range of factors that cause potential users exclusion from using public libraries. This is unfortunate, because the major function of a public library is to meet the information needs of all community members without discrimination. Previous research has shown that librarians usually draw two conclusions about exclusion factors: first, it is users' personal preference when they do not use library services; and secondly, inadequate marketing of public library services to the citizenry. This is due to the fact that a public library as an inclusive institution is so ardently incorporated into the identity of public librarianship that questioning the social inclusiveness of libraries rarely occurs. This paper examines the issue of exclusion, attempts to define the inclusive society, and subsequently makes recommendation on how the librarians can use their professional capacity in service provision to combat the exclusion in the society in turn enhance development.

1. Introduction

The term public library first appeared in Latin (bibliotheca publica) as a technical term in the 17th Century to distinguish the general University libraries of Oxford and Cambridge by then from those of endowed libraries (Kinya, 2011). UNESCO (1994) showed its recognition of public libraries when it stated that "the public library is the principal means where the records of man's thoughts and ideas and the expression of his imagination are made freely available to all". In its manifesto, UNESCO further directs that "the public library shall in principle be free of charge" and services "should be provided on the basis of equality of access for all persons regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language or social status". The manifesto declares UNESCO's belief in the public library as a breathing force for education, culture and information and as an indispensable agent for the nurturing of peace and spiritual wellbeing of society. This is in line with Cullen(2003) who defined public library system as a combination of people, activities, events and object resources working together to convert inputs to outputs. Such libraries serve communities with multipurpose information free of charge or at nominal fee (Thompson, 1974). Initially, Tanzania Library Service (TLS), established 1975, succeeding the Tanganyika Library Services Board of 1963. TLS has authority over documentation services, training of librarians public libraries, literary campaigns and it promotes indigenous literature.

2. Public library and Information Access

Discussion of the concept of public libraries would bear less meaning if global emphasis on freedom of access to information and the right to information are not mentioned here. The right of access to information is considered as a crucial human right and useful tool for individual, societal prosperity, freedom and development. An informed society exercises it democratic rights and plays a vigorous role in the society. However, productive contribution and the development of democracy depend on acceptable education and unlimited access to thought, culture and information (Kinya, 2011).

Freedom of access to information (to use, share and distribute) is a right praised by some as the very core of the information society, and accused by others of being a merely formal standard with little practical reality in a world where the majority of the population does not have access to information (Pateman, 2010). With access to information, people should freely express themselves, since freedom of expression is one of the basic conditions for society's progress and for the development of every man. The effective implementation of freedom of expression requires citizens' access to express opinions and to seek information in the public sphere; hence one of the current biggest challenges is to ensure that the exclusive charter of the information society is replaced by inclusiveness. This is something that any popular government in the world should pursue as echoed by some researchers who pointed out that "a popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both (Pateman, 2010; Lor, 2003).

 In support of what the governments should do to realize this dream of developing an informed society, the World Summit on the information society (WSIS) Declaration of 2003 created a vision for the information society. The WSIS defined information society as " a people-centered, inclusive and development oriented information society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge to enable individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life. Unequal access to information leads to unequal distribution of wealth and resources in the world and poverty and lack of infrastructure and development at all levels, for example, health and education. Public Libraries thus form a basic information delivery infrastructure and act as repositories of information and knowledge that provide access to information and ideas to people. This may have been the principle behind the Governing Board of IFLA, in its anniversary meeting in Glasglow, Scotland (2002) that declared that public libraries should:

♦ Ensure their services respect equity.

♦ Provide access to information, ideas and works of imagination in various formats, supporting personal development of all age groups and active participation in society and decision-making process.

♦ Contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights.

♦ Acquire, preserve and make available to all users without discrimination the widest variety of materials; and

♦ Tackle information inequality demonstrated in the growing information gap and the digital divide.

3. Social Information Exclusion

Information exclusion and inclusion debates have emerged as strong issues at both national and international levels in the recent past. Social information exclusion offends human dignity, denies information seekers their fundamental human rights which threatens the democracy of any nation. According to UK government, social exclusion is "a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown. Social exclusion can happen to anyone either directly or indirectly. However, some people are significantly more at risk than others (Pateman, 2010). Social exclusion refers to needs of groups and individuals who do not have access to services and facilities or to a society's decision making and or power structures and this is sometimes seen as a key policy issue (Pateman, 2010). Rao (2005) suggested that social exclusion can never be contained in isolation but the effort has to be multidimensional and multi-pronged. These dimensions are both technological and economic and include connectivity, content, community, commerce, capacity, culture, cooperation and capital (Rao, 2000).

The prevailing discourse concerning social exclusion reflects a set of views about those who are disadvantaged: suffering from poverty, poor housing and health, family breakdown, unemployment, criminal environments and limited life chances, and about the barriers that prevent their social integration. Social exclusion is the result of combination of linked problems and affects both individuals and communities. The causes are seen as multiple and complex, and therefore need to be tackled in a holistic way rather than each being seen as separate and unrelated. It requires 'joined-up' solutions. This means that the Tanzania Library Services must work together in partnership with both public and private organization to tackle social information exclusion. Exclusion has been seen as the 'inevitable' consequence of economic growth and development. Social and cultural regeneration are now needed to address the problems that have resulted. It is argued that social exclusion denies people their fundamental human rights leading to social and economic instability, marginalization and deepening inequalities, which threatens the stability of democracy in Tanzania .

4. Social Information Inclusion

In the context of provision of information to all, social information inclusion refers to "giving all people access to the information, services and facilities that they have a right to, and making sure that they are fully aware of and know how to take up their entitlement to these services" (MLA, 2007, p.9). Social inclusion has various benefits that include:

5. Democratic Participation and Understanding

Provision of information to all members of a society is essential for public participation in all activities pertaining to the society. The public is truly able to participate in the democratic process only when they

have information about the activities and policies of the government. When the public knows the reasons behind some of the government decisions, its support is guaranteed and misunderstandings and dissatisfaction are reduced. This was supported by New Zealand Official Information Act of 1982 which noted that freedom of information could not be expected to end all differences of opinion within the community or to resolve major political issues but when applied systematically can lead to narrow differences of opinion, increase the effectiveness of policies adopted and strengthen public confidence in the system (Pateman, 2010).

6.   Improved Decision Making Process

Past researches indicate that decisions that are made public due to right to information laws are more likely to be based on objective and justifiable reasons. For example, the Australian law reform commission and administration Review Council in 1997 found out that freedom of information Act has had a marked impact on the way people make decisions and record information. The Commission observed that since the enforcement of the right to information to all, decision makers focused on the need to base decisions on relevant information.

7.   Reduce Danger of Human Rights Violations

Right to information to improve the enforcement of many economic and political rights is greatly enhanced. For example, In Thailand, a mother whose daughter was denied entry into an elite state school demanded the school's entrance exam results. When she was turned down, she appealed to the Information Commission Courts. In the end, she obtained information showing that children of influential people were accepted into the school even if they got low scores. This compelled the council of state to issue an order that all schools accept students solely on merit. In addition, access to individual records ensures such records are accurate and decisions are not based on out-of-date or irrelevant information. The right to information has other advantages that include exposing corruption, making government and the economy more efficient; uncover mismanagement of food supplies; making economic shortages less likely; and expose environmental hazards that threaten health and livelihoods.

8. Aspects of Information Exclusion

8.1 Literacy Levels and language of Publications

 Levels of literacy and the predominance of principal world languages such as English as the language of printed and online information are elements of exclusion. Many oral communities are not able to make meaning through interaction with printed resources, and hence are unable to participate in the envisaged information society. Those oral communities consider interaction with information resources as a one way communication system, quite discontinuous with indigenous forms of communication. To tackle this challenge of literacy, TLS, which is the major public library in Tanzania, through various reading campaigns, provides opportunities for communities to enhance their reading and information seeking habits, and therefore sustain

literacy. It is clearly known that, an informed individual has more advantages on proper decision towards development issue compared to a illiterate.

8.2 Physical Access to Libraries

According to Kiondo (1998) distance from the library is a crucial factor in its use. The nearer the library, the more people will use it; and the further it is away; the less people will use it. Their research on Camel libraries affirmed this when the findings indicated that more users were within a distance of 1km from where public library services were being offered. Many libraries in Tanzania are concentrated in cities and major towns in Tanzania. This leaves the remote parts of the country excluded from access to information that is crucial for the communities to make informed decisions (Jemo, 2008) as an example from Kenya. Over the years, the Government of Tanzania through the Tanzania Library Services (TLS) has tried to eliminate this kind of exclusion by opening community and mobile libraries. Currently, TLS has over 50 branches spread countrywide. However, much more needs to be done because there are still large populations in exclusion that need to be included. Thus, among the 26 regions in Tanzania, there are still many districts where such libraries have not yet been established. It should be noted that Tanzania economy is backed on agriculture, of which are found in rural areas (districts).

8.3 Challenged Persons

The available public libraries in Tanzania were not designed keeping in mind the needs of the physically and visually challenged information users. This disadvantaged group form party of the society that needs information to enable them participate in all areas of national development. They also need to be sensitized more on their rights; something that can happen only if they have access to relevant information.

8.4 ICT Skills

Many public libraries today have developed to what we call hybrid type; providing both print and electronic resources, while putting more emphasis on electronic resources due to their ability to be accessed by multiple users concurrently.

Inadequate ICT skills and support to use electronic resources is however a significant factor in preventing certain persons from accessing information in Tanzania. Potential information users in many of the disadvantaged groups are often prevented from making use of ICTs because of low levels of computing and technology skills. This challenge is made more complex by attitudinal barriers with some excluded citizens pointing out that computers are for "brainy" people, for males, for the young and are difficult to use (Muddiman et al, 2001). Others feel that computers are unsafe because of the amount of unsuitable material on the internet (Botha et al, 2002,p. 22). Further research has indicated some disparities between male and female use in ICTs with access to the internet by male counterparts being greater in developing countries than female (United Nations , 2000). This has had serious implications, especially for women in the participation of national and global economic growth.

8.5 Connectivity

Though internet facilities are fairly spread in Tanzania like any other country in East Africa, there is remarkable concentration in urban centres with institutions far remote from cities experiencing difficulties in getting connection (Mutula,2002), an evidence of low level of exclusion with regard to ICT network. Hence appropriate technology for rural and disadvantaged communities is lacking. Even in the areas where communities are connected and have the skill to access online information they face another challenge of low speed internet and limited bandwidth. For example, to open a document to read takes quite a while because of the snail speed of the internet.

8.6 Funding

The planning, executing and implementation of any programme requires considerable financial support. However, the extent of financial support whether at local government or provincial government level in developing countries and particularly in Tanzania, has not always been consistent (Raju, 1995, p.194). Survey findings of the public library sector in Tanzania revealed inadequate funding and the consequential negative impact on important aspects of public library provision (Leach, 1998). A memorandum drawn up by the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) and directed at various ministers noted that the public library services have been steadily declining and deteriorating as a result of legislative and funding issues resulting from restructuring of government at national and provincial levels. Public library funding challenges were further emphasized by Ford (2004) who pointed out that funding is one of the major challenges for public libraries around the world. Without adequate funds, public libraries are not able to acquire enough information resources to meet the needs of an inclusive society.

8.7 Bridging the Information Gap and the Way Forward

Librarians as Information providers can make available a variety of information collections which can be used from various physical public library location. A range of publications and access formats can be accommodated, from remote login catalogues and indexes to provision of electronic copies of entire collection or works, in print or other formats (Muddiman etal, 2001).

Librarians have knowledge and experiences to build a well-balanced collection to meet social, political and economic interests of the society. This can be enhanced by giving special consideration in provision of information to predominantly oral rural communities in Tanzania.

Librarians need to shift focus on documents and focus on information seekers. Traditional librarianship has been based on selecting materials to fill public library shelves and then wait for information seekers to visit the facility in search of information. On the contrary, in order for the library personnel to effectively meet information seekers diverse life needs, the information services have to be informed by the communities in which the libraries operate, and information needs to be based on regular assessment processes.

Repackaging the product of orality is essential considering that communities are rich with information that is in oral form that needs to be captured and repackaged (manuscripts and print) in the appropriate media

such as video, digital photos, and tapes in a collaborative and ethical manner. This should be based on the understanding of the communities to which the information service is being provided.

Librarians should become researchers to enable them to frequently interact with library users and prompt them to define their information needs. It is the responsibility of the librarian to then prioritize highly relevant information from a pool of interesting information according to user preferences (Kenny, 2002). In addition, the librarian should identify through community profiles and other methodologies such as needs analysis, all groups and individuals that are socially excluded or are at risk of information exclusion for inclusion.

Librarians should effectively play the role of a reference and referral information manager. This will involve directing members of the knowledge community to outside information when appropriate and maintain high level information about sources outside the community (ibid). A reference librarian needs to be widely knowledgeable in terms of resources and where they can be found for use and appropriately directing information seekers to relevant information resources.

Librarians through their professional Associations such as Tanzania Library Association (TLA) should establish a Council Committee on social information exclusion. This Council would be charged with the responsibility of highlighting the plight of those socially excluded, draw up strategies on narrowing the exclusion gap and come up with progress reports. The Council should actively engage the socially excluded people through involving them in the planning, implementation and monitoring of services through performance indicators and targets to measure success achieved in tackling social exclusion.

The image and identity of a public library is also an important factor when discussing social inclusion matters. The connotation of some of the public library names is unwelcoming. The librarian can positively influence this by considering local measures such as renaming the libraries, (for example Community resource centres, Idea stores and many more). This is in line with Ward (1996) idea of changing names of libraries when he pointed out that the term "mobile information delivery systems" is more appropriate than the "mobile libraries". The rebranding of a traditional public library name gives it a new image that is proactive, friendly, relevant and easily accessible environment. Other library practices and procedures should be reviewed to ensure they are not barriers to information access. For instance, procedures of becoming public library members should not be over-bureaucratic. Librarians should also establish more self-help public access terminal to overcome barriers to use experienced by some excluded potential information users.

Librarians need to be careful when planning for new public libraries. Priority should be given to those libraries serving communities in greatest need. Relocation and collocation with community centres, schools, leisure centres and other centres used by socially excluded people should be considered in order to improve the impact of public libraries in tackling social exclusion (Pateman, 2010). Working with neighbouring authorities to effectively deliver services to socially excluded communities may be an appropriate action for librarians to take.

Collection development needs to be critically examined to ensure that it is comprehensive enough and relevant to the community which the library serves. The policy should be based on the needs and interests of local potential information users, reflecting diversity of society as well as define purpose, scope and content of the collection (Kinya, 2011). Librarians also need to liaise with material suppliers (writers, publishers, booksellers etc.) to identify the range of materials available for socially excluded people and gaps in that provision.

To remain relevant, Librarians should draw up ICT plans outlining how the needs of those excluded communities and individuals are to be prioritized (Jemo, 2008).Take a case in Kenya Mutula (2002, p.3) puts it that "wider Internet connectivity can enhance Kenya's economic growth meaning more people spending more time on the Internet and many organizations using the Internet to do business and creation of many technical related jobs". It is therefore the responsibility of librarians to improve connectivity, increase access, through use of multiple competing technologies, public and community access points, and sharing of best practices. Public library human resources should also be developed through ICT trainings, enhanced awareness of decision makers, and expansion of ICT learning opportunities to the rural, poor, and disenfranchised (Wolff , 2005).

9.   The Future

In the context of a government that wishes to give a higher profile to information access, we need to raise critical questions about policies and the role of information access in reducing social exclusion. The emphasis on 'joined-up thinking' at least recognizes the complexities of social and cultural life, and moves citizens away from over simplistic notions about the causes of poverty, unemployment, racism and other forms of discrimination. Librarians need to be aware of making simplistic assumptions, especially when there is prior experience upon which to draw their information decisions for the benefit of the citizenry.

Despite their different epistemological bases, it is possible to be argued that there can be no social inclusion unless there is social exclusion. The elimination of social exclusion as a practical activity is unachievable. Moreover, seeking to promote social inclusion heighten awareness of difference and social exclusion. In this sense, we need to understand that non-exclusion is not the same as inclusion, and that we must avoid taking away the freedom of those who choose not to be included.

10. Conclusion

The social information exclusion in public libraries in Tanzania is real. Therefore along term effort to meet the needs of the excluded and vulnerable society with a commitment to improved information structures will contribute to meeting the information needs of the excluded information seekers in public libraries. This will only be achieved if there is improved and well coordinated information infrastructure. Regular information user surveys reviews will go a long way in minimizing information provision exclusion and subsequently increase inclusion of information services and programs. Librarians in Tanzania therefore have a greater opportunity to make meaningful contribution to the realization of comprehensive information inclusion.

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About Author

Mr. Julius Tunsaje Tweve, Lecturer, Tumaini University Dar es Salaam College.
E-mail: julius.tweve@gmail.com