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African public libraries driving development: AfLIA Leadership Academy projects

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Abstract:

Development is a process that engenders growth, positive change or an improved state of being for individuals, communities and for situations. Literacy is a prerequisite for development in many sectors. Public libraries have always been linked with literacy efforts particularly in Africa. However, through its Leadership Academy, the African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA) is empowering innovations and expanding the raison d'être of African public libraries to include development projects in various sectors ranging from health, environmental sustainability, gender issues and agriculture in different communities in Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda. The Academy's modules of Effective Leadership, Change Management, Innovation and Transformation, Asset Based Community Development, Advocacy, Monitoring and Evaluation are clearly targeted at the metamorphosis of African public libraries into institutions that act as catalysts for community development. Twelve (21) projects are being undertaken by the Cohort 1 of the Leadership Academy. Four (4) are discussed in the paper and put into perspective as activities that produce sustainable positive changes in communities. In-country cascading of the modules of the Leadership Academy is recommended to further promote the concept of African public libraries as catalysts for development.

Keywords: Public libraries, Africa, AfLIA Leadership Academy, Development, Projects

Africa is rich in natural and human resources yet countries in the continent still battle with myriad development challenges. Approximately 38% of African adults (153 million people) are illiterate and two-thirds of these are female (UNESCO, 2017). Most of the countries of the world that have the lowest youth literacy rates are in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). The unemployment rate in the continent is between 12-14% with the possibility of rising higher (African Center for Economic Transformation, 2016). Africa is faced with many public health challenges (World Health Organization, 2018). Weather patterns, burgeoning population growth, and the effects of climate change continue to threaten food security in the continent where at least 70% depend on the land and water for their livelihoods (Environmental and Energy Study Institute, 2017). No institution in the continent can afford to stand aloof from these pressing development challenges that can no longer be ignored.

African public libraries had always been perceived as part of the educational system, offering study-related materials and literacy services through building book collections, lending books out, running story hour programmes in the children's section, establishing book clubs in schools, providing spaces and resources for adult education lessons and offering reference services. Despite this, the potential of African public libraries to transform lives and communities through innovative services and drive meaningful development has also been recognised (Elbert, Fuegi and Lipeikaité, 2012). These libraries have been practically standing on the threshold of an open door, waiting for just a push to become facilitators of development in different African communities.

In a bid to strengthen the public library sector in Africa and have innovative, connected, networked and skilled community-minded leaders, the African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA) in partnership with the Public Library Association of the American Library Association (PLA -ALA) and funded by Global Libraries Initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation set up the AfLIA Leadership Academy (AfLAc). The Academy is a nine months leadership enhancement programme that aims to assist the participants to be innovative and learn from each other. Its main focus is teaching public librarians the different perspectives of leadership that will transform their mindsets and equip them to respond succinctly to challenges in the community through innovative services using library facilities and the entire community as a resource base (AfLIA, 2017). The Academy has three integral parts – a core 5day residential/educational interaction with lectures and coaching sessions from seasoned librarians and administrators, online interactions with evaluations between the participants and coaches and a community project to be done by each participant.

The first Cohort made up of twelve middle-level management participants from Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda public libraries was admitted into the Academy in January 2018. At the face-to-face residential/networking interaction which took place in Kenya from 15-20th January, 2018, the participants were taken through eight (8) modules. The unit on Effective Leadership was taught with the aim of enhancing the participants' understanding of their ability to lead effectively by learning background knowledge of leadership theories, styles and how to recognize and build up their strengths and capacities in order to drive change and innovativeness in their libraries and communities. As leaders, the participants also learned how to cultivate the principles of change management, appreciate the different types of change an organization such as a library can face and understand the skills needed to successfully plan and/or respond to change, implement and manage change in the library and in the community. The module on Innovation and Transformation exposed the librarians on how think innovatively, take smart risks, new library practices that will assist them as they undertake the

mandatory community projects, the concept of working for broader benefits beyond self, exploring, experimenting, listening to other voices and inviting in other contributors as well as how innovation leads to transformation of the library and the community. Advocacy, how to build and maintain partnerships as well as Monitoring and Evaluation were also taught as different modules.

Projects

A major component of the Academy is the development and carrying out of a project by the participants in answer to identified challenges in their different communities which should be in tandem with the global and regional development frameworks and the National Development Plan (NDP of their countries). The participants had indicated what they would work on before the Kenya meeting. However, they were given a choice of changing or tinkering with the ideas after going through all the modules. Only four (4) projects from Ghana, Kenya, Namibia and Nigeria which have reached a reasonable level of implementation are discussed.

Ghana

Beatrice Ampadu, a participant in the AfLIA Leadership Academy is a librarian with Lartebiokorshie Grace Library of Ghana Library Authority. The librarian is carrying out a project on dissemination of information on reproductive health to curb the cases of rampant teenage pregnancy in Ghana. Females represent 51.2 percent of Ghana's population out of which 22.4 percent are adolescents. In 2014, adolescents accounted for 30 percent of births registered in Ghana (Coughlin, 2016). It is estimated that 750,000 adolescents get pregnant annually in Ghana. In the communities being served by the Library, teenage pregnancy among pupils in Junior High School is becoming an alarming. In 2015, 10000 cases were recorded, in 2016, it rose to 18342 (Awuni, 2017). Preliminary data examined show a marked increase in 2017.

These are young girls between 13-17yrs who are yet to write their Basic Education Certificate Examinations. These numbers are worrisome and justify the need for a library to provide innovative information services that address sexual and reproductive health issues in Ghana. According to (Donkor and Lariba, 2017), Ghanaian young girls lack information about the biological changes that take place in their bodies as they transit into and through adolescence. This results in teenage pregnancies which invariably makes the girls to drop out of school. Beyond the health risk implications of physically immature girls being mothers, many of them also battle with mental health issues as lack of adequate social support leads to depression. This literally reinvents the wheel and starts a fresh cycle of poverty for the young girls and their babies. This spirals down to grievous health and socioeconomic implications that create inequalities and hinder development in the society (Bodeeb, 2017).



Information of dissemination on reproductive health by a nursing officer from Mamprobi Polyclinic at a seminar organised by Lartekiborshie Library

The librarian sought and got collaborations with the Member of Parliament representing the constituency, Planned Parenthood of Ghana (PPAG), the Directorate of Public Health, Mamprobi Polyclinic and Ghana Education Services. The target is to reach 1000 school children within the ages of 10-16 and educate them on the importance of sexual health, abstinence and the need to mature physically, socially and economically before making babies. The first series of campaign to curb teenage pregnancy was held at the Socco Cluster of Schools, Mamprobi on 17th May, 2018. Midwives, doctors and family health specialists addressed the young people made up of 150 girls and 50 boys. The young people were made to understand the processes of pregnancy and childbirth as well as the attendant issues that crop up when underage girls get pregnant.

In order to continue the engagement and sustain the project, the Library took a record of the schools and children in attendance and has signed up to start book box mobile service to them. All the resource persons also encouraged the young people to keep in contact with them and ask for one-on-one discussion anytime they have difficulties. Also, an NGO has agreed to hold a Talk on teenage pregnancy every month in the Library. The librarian had also gone on Twitter and Facebook to talk about the project with the hashtag #LibrariansWhoDare. This created awareness about the programme. Sanitary towels sourced privately by the librarian were given to all the young girls who attended the programme. The next Talk will in June for another cluster of schools. The Library has collected baseline data from ante-natal facilities of teenage pregnancy in the wider community. This data will be reviewed after a year in correlation with other factors to determine if the rate of teenage pregnancy has gone down and if the project has helped in curbing teenage pregnancy in the area.

This project is important for the development of the community and directly addresses the UN 2030 Goals especially Goal 3 – ‘Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’. In particular the project focuses on Target 7 of Goal 3 – ‘By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programme’. The project also speaks to AU 2063 Agenda Aspiration 1 – ‘A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development’ with particular focus on the Priority Area of ‘Health and Nutrition’. This project also addresses one of the five pillars of Ghana’s Long-Term Plan 2015-2035 – ‘Build an equitable healthy and prosperous society’ (National Development and Planning Commission, 2018).

Kenya

Miriam Mureithi, another AfLIA Leadership Academy participant is a principal librarian at Kenya National Library Services, Thika Branch. Thika has an estimated population of 88,625 people. Unemployment is a global issue but the Africa with a definitive population youth bulge is experiencing the problem deeply compared to other parts of the globe. According to Otuki (2017), Kenya’s ratio of youth (aged 15-24) to the population is 20.3 percent, this is far higher than the average for the African continent -19.2 percent. According to the figures reeled out by Statista (2017), youth unemployment in Kenya has been hovering between 24 percent in 2011-2014 to 22.7 percent in 2016. Brookings Institute (2017) had identified a deficiency and a skill-set gap between what is taught in African schools and the requirements of 21st century employers and workplaces as one of the core reasons for high unemployment rate in Africa. The critical areas include IT, information literacy skills, problem solving skills among others. Miriam, the librarian identified this challenge in Thika and decided to carry out a project aptly named ‘Provision of ICT and entrepreneurial skills and information to young people in Thika’.

The main objectives of the project are to train young school leavers in digital skills and to further equip them with the knowledge and proficiency to start their own enterprises. The young people are to be taught basic computer skills, practical skills and tips in financial management that will enable them to start and run businesses successfully. The librarian identified and worked with stakeholders in the community namely; the Ministry of Education, Directorate of Adult Education who provided a trainer for different computer packages and Adult Literacy, three NGOs (ROpportunity Trust who provided a trainer for entrepreneurial skills, Trace Shield who printed materials for the training and Macheo an organisation that works with youths) and Ministry of Youth to help fix up the young people whenever opportunities crop up. The Thika Library was a conducive environment for the training as

computers, Internet access and electronic resources were available. The first batch of 48 (forty-eight) young people were trained from March and graduated on 11th May, 2018. The Library has commenced lobbying with the Ministry of Youth and opinion leaders in the community to get jobs or support to start businesses for the youths. The Ministry of Education in the region has recognised the programme. The second cohort has taken off with 57 (fifty-seven) youths.



Training for Youths at Thika Library, Kenya



Graduation of the 1st Cohort

Empowering the youths through increasing their employability quotient is a developmental drive. Goal 8 of the UN 2030 Agenda is to – ‘Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all’. This project fits into Goal 8, Target 6 – ‘By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training’. The sole indicator for achieving this Target is decreasing – ‘Proportion of youth (aged 15–24 years) not in education, employment or training’. It also addresses the AU 2063 Agenda Aspiration 1 and the Priority Area of ‘Incomes, Jobs and decent work’. The Social Pillar of Kenya 2030 Vision dwells on ‘Investing in the People of Kenya’ and this project addresses the Education and Training Sector as well as ‘Gender, Youth and Vulnerable Groups’ under it (Ministry of State for Planning, National Development and Vision 2030, 2012).

Namibia

People in Outapi community, Namibia struggle to keep fit and live healthier lifestyles. They would want to do exercises and receive health tips that will assist them in achieving this. The community had a lone gym which was quite expensive, unaffordable and has since closed down. Overweight and obesity which are non-communicable medical conditions have been identified as major risk factors for cardiovascular diseases, Type 2 Diabetes, some types of cancer, osteo-arthritis, reduced life expectancy and lowered self-esteem which has grievous implications on the cognitive and social development of individuals (Pazvakawambwa and Tjipueja, 2013). Many Namibians especially females are either overweight or obese (Kapitako, 2017). Female obesity prevalence for Namibians rose from 13.8 percent in 1997 to 25.4 percent in 2016 showing an average growth rate of 3.26 percent (Knoema, 2017). According to Hayes (2017), cardiovascular diseases and diabetes account for 12.4 percent of deaths in Namibia.

Katrina Shikuni, a participant in AfLIA Leadership Academy and a librarian in Outapi Community Library, Namibia took up the challenge as her project with the main objective of providing preventative measures such as sharing health information and bringing community members together to exercise and support one another on a journey to fitness and healthy lifestyle. Approval was sought and received from the Management of the Library. A spot

outside of the reading spaces was allocated for the project within the building that houses the Library. The Ministry of Youths & Sports agreed to collaborate as well as NAPPA who volunteered a nurse to measure and check vital signs of the participants before and after the exercises. A WhatsApp group was formed for the Library Fitness club for communication and as a health information sharing platform. The Librarian talked about the project with pictures on Twitter with the hashtag #LibrariansWhoDare and she got connected with other libraries who run the same type of service for their communities. The project took off on 10th April.



Library Fitness Club, Outapi Library, Namibia

The project is meant to assist in the attainment of Goal 3, Target 4 of the UN 2030 Agenda - 'By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being'. The project also finds a focus in Aspiration 1 of the AU 2063 Agenda with particular emphasis on the Priority Area of 'Health and Nutrition' and in Section 3.2.6 of the 5th National Development Plan of Namibia (ndp5) which focuses on building capable and healthy human resources (Republic of Namibia, 2017).

Nigeria

Sapele is a community of farmers, fishermen and traders with a sprinkling of those with white collar jobs. With a population of 174,273 people, the community lies by River Benin and is about 98miles from the Escravos Bar, a major oil drilling location. Oil production has largely affected the Niger Delta fishing communities through oil spillage, corrosion of oil pipes, mishandling, sabotage and accidents (Olaji, Nwogu, Yakubu and Olaji, 2014). Fish farming has become problematic in the community with livelihoods threatened as fishes disappear from the rivers and streams. Many of the fishermen now turned to creating ponds for fish farms instead of relying on the rivers and streams. This requires funds and expert knowledge in order to have profitable yields. Recognising this major challenge of the community, Friday Imoni-Atebafia a participant in the AfLIA Leadership Academy and an Assistant Chief Librarian with the Sapele branch of Delta State Library Board, Nigeria, chose to do a project on improving fish farming productivity in Sapele and environs.

The objectives of the project are; to bring together the different stakeholders as well as the identified community assets who could help the fish farmers have higher yields, provide information and assistance to the fish farmers especially the womenfolk on the different types of loans available in the banks and how to secure such loans and lastly, to provide information sessions/resources to help the fish farmers learn techniques that will boost their yields. The project also seeks to equip would-be fish farmers with information that would enable them go into the business. The stakeholders identified by the Librarian are first, the staff of the library who needed to buy into his vision of running a project for the fish farmers, the fish farmers

through the loose local organisation that they have, bank officials in the town, local government authorities and the community youths represented by their leader.

The librarian did a survey to ascertain the challenges he will be face in carrying out the project. Lack of trust of the bank officials by the fish farmers and apathy by the fish farmers towards the library and its staff as brokers of fish farming information and bank loans were identified as probable major hinderances to the success of the project. The fish farmers also expressed an initial resistance to the idea that people from ‘an office’ will teach them how to handle fishing better. Using the knowledge of change management taught in the Leadership Academy, the librarian held various meetings with the fish farmers to convince them of the sincerity of the library. A connect seminar was then held to get all the stakeholders to meet together on 16th April, 2018. One hundred and fifty fish farmers were invited, thirty-two showed up. Two experts in fish farming, two bank officials and the youth leader were invited to speak to the fish farmers. It was a cordial meeting. All the questions asked by the fish farmers were effectively answered.

Through the connect seminar, a WhatsApp Group was created which enables the librarian to share relevant information on fish farming and available funding with the fish farmers as well answer questions as relates to the seminar. A woman fish farmer has been able to apply for and receive a low interest loan of N700,000.00 (seven hundred thousand naira only) for her fish farming business. Her loan was processed quickly because she was able to show records of her former sales and bank deposits of same. She has also been given an option of additional loans if she can repay the one borrowed within six months. A would-be fish farmer who attended the seminar has also applied for a loan which is being processed. He works in a firm and his salary account is being used as a collateral for the loan. The project is ongoing. Fish cultivation normally takes a period of six months for maturity. The Library is working closely with the fish farming and monitoring them to ensure that they remember the techniques taught them in the seminar.



Facilitator at the Connect Seminar



New pond of loan beneficiary being prepared for fingerling stocking

The project drives development in the community and fits into Goal 2 of the UN 2030 Goals – ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. It is a tight fit for Target 3 – ‘By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment’. The project also addresses Aspiration 1, AU 2063 Agenda

– ‘A prosperous Africa, based on inclusive growth and sustainable development’ especially the Goal of ‘Modern agriculture for increased productivity and production’ and the Priority Area of ‘Agricultural productivity and production’. The project also fits into the Nigerian Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (2017-2020) as one of the pillars is the prioritization of food security as a fundamental national objective as stated in 3.1.1 - ‘Enhancing productivity by improving access to land, information, knowledge, and inputs, soil fertility, production management, storage, processing, marketing and trade’ (Ministry of Budget and National Planning, 2017).

Common Threads

There are common threads that run through these projects. First, they are all community inspired services. They all address issues in the immediate environs of the library. This is expected to further embed the libraries into the communities as relevant institutions that are essential for development at the most basic levels. Second, the services are all being provided through collaborations with other bodies in the formal and non-formal sectors of the community. In this age of interconnectedness and insufficient library budgets; collaborations and partnerships are very essential for libraries to function maximally. It also points to the fact that libraries are becoming aware of the need to partner with other assets in the community for the provision of information services. Third, librarians are taking their services outside the four walls of the physical libraries. This depict the picture of librarians as development workers in their different communities that are willing to leave their comfort zones, meet and interact with members of the community in order to serve them better. There is also an infusion of technology into information services in order to meet challenges in the community.

Conclusion

The AfLIA Leadership Academy projects have pushed public libraries in Africa from just lending of books and reference services to institutions that are development-oriented, disseminating information for services that answer to challenges in their communities. These projects are apt examples of how libraries are delivering on the regional and global development agenda and are becoming anchors of transformation in different African communities.

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