

## The Role of public libraries in the attainment of Botswana's vision 2016

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### Abstract:

*The aim of this paper is to illustrate how public libraries are supporting the government agenda to attain an educated and informed society; in particular how strategies and programs by the public libraries support the Botswana National Vision 2016 agenda.*

**Keywords:** Public libraries, Botswana National Vision 2016, library services

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### Introduction

Botswana is a very small country in terms of population density; there are about 2, 100 000 people in an area of 581,730 km<sup>2</sup> (Statistics Botswana, 2011). The country is a former British protectorate which gained independence in 1966. According to the Botswana Literacy Survey of 2003 (the survey is done every 10 years), the literacy rate of the country was 81% and is currently estimated at 83%, therefore many people are able to read. Government has taken on a policy stand to have children sent to school from primary to junior secondary without a break, and made it compulsory for all children to be educated (Revised Education Policy, year); most Batswana have gone through at least primary school education. The establishment of public libraries is a nearly as old a development as the independence of Botswana. The Botswana National Library Service was established in September 1967 by Act of Parliament (National Library Service Act No 29, 1967). The first public library and was officially opened by the first president of the Republic of Botswana the late Sir Seretse Khama on the 8th April 1968 (Ministry of Youth Sport and Culture website). The results of the Sesigo study of 2009 showed that very few people used public libraries daily and weekly, and that among those who did, half of them were students. ). As such, for a long time a lot people did not recognise the value or relevance of libraries in their lives; libraries were mostly associated with schools/learning.

However, in the past few years a lot of changes have been taking place in public libraries which have changed the perception of library customers (actual and potential) towards public libraries. First public libraries have become more visible and attractive; there are many new library buildings that have been commissioned and completed. Secondly, through the Sesigo Project (2009 - 2013), several libraries have been equipped with computers and internet connection that are available to the public for free. Further, libraries have introduced programs aimed at addressing their customers' needs and therefore the customers see value in visiting the libraries.

## **Botswana National Vision 2016**

The Botswana National Vision 2016 is a national manifesto, and it contains a set of ambitious goals for transforming the society of Botswana triggered by the rapid changes in global social attitudes and values (Vision 2016, 2011 ). The Vision principles and goals are intended to inform all future National Development Plans and midterm reviews, and guide the formulation of future national policies. As such many of the goals and objectives of National development Plan (NDP 10) are in keeping with this long term Vision for Botswana. These include the theme of sustainable economic diversification, the thrust given to employment creation, the need for increased international competitiveness of the economy and export promotion. The Botswana National Vision 2016 is divided into 7 pillars:

1. An Educated, Informed Nation – under this pillar Botswana envisages that by the year 2016, there will be in place a system of quality education that is able to adapt to the changing needs of the country as the world around us changes; the country will also have a system of information technology that matches that of other countries.
2. An Open, Democratic and Accountable Nation -Botswana of the future will be a community oriented democracy, with strong decentralised institutions.
3. A Moral and Tolerant Nation – Botswana will be a united, discrimination free society that is tolerant and upholds national moral and cultural values.
4. A United and Proud Nation - Botswana will be a united and proud nation, sharing common goals based on a common heritage, national pride and a desire for stability.
5. A Safe and Secure Nation - By the year 2016, Botswana will be a crime free zone, white collar crime will have ended and law enforcement will have strengthened.
6. A Prosperous, Productive and Innovative Nation – This pillar focuses on economic growth, sustainable development, job creation and diversification Botswana will society distinguished by the pursuit of excellence through a new culture of hard work and discipline - where effort is rewarded and where the necessary skills are available - where business and entrepreneurial activities are encouraged and supported - actively contributing to the scientific and technological civilisation of the future.
7. A Compassionate, Just and Caring Nation – By 2016, Botswana would have eradicated abject poverty, improved health services (both in terms of quality and quantity) and the spread of HIV will have stopped.

## **The role of public libraries in the attainment of Botswana National Vision 2016**

The Botswana National Vision 2016 (hereafter, the Vision) envisages that every Motswana including organisations will take an active part in all its elements to ensure that it is successfully realised; thus it is necessary for libraries to take active measures to support attainment of the Vision.

The traditional role of public libraries is to acquire, organise and disseminate information. Public libraries are a vital part of the community; they provide a neutral space for community engagement, they share vital information relevant to the development of the community, they provide a space for recreational activities (such as play grounds, art festivals, cultural game etc)for the community's children and the youth, and they promote community culture by collecting and preserving cultural information as well providing a space for show casing cultural activities. Libraries are a stepping stone towards the attainment of government projects and the national vision; they are agents of social development. They are a medium of social inclusion in that they accommodate the information needs of all members of the public regardless of their background. Information is the lifeblood of any society and vital to the activities of both the government and private sector ( Harande, 2009) including the sustenance of democracy; libraries are therefore natural partners in local economic development efforts (Hamilton-Pennell, 2008). They are also a key place for dispensing government information; people already come to the library for information and other activities, therefore they become the perfect locations for distributing government information.

According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)/UNESCO guidelines for public library service:

“the primary purposes of the public library are to provide resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for education, information and personal development including recreation and leisure. They have an important role in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving the individual access to a wide and varied range of knowledge, ideas and opinions.”

### **Programs that public libraries in Botswana are doing in support of government programs, in particular Vision 2016**

There are 102 public libraries under the National Library Service in Botswana comprising of 33 public libraries and 69 village reading rooms. These facilities are scattered across the country and provide a sources of information for the public. The information may be leisure, educational, business support or internet access. Over the past few years libraries in Botswana have been undergoing massive transformation. Several new library structures have recently being completed across the country and some old libraries refurbished. The new and refurbished libraries have given communities renewed interest in library services. The refurbishment and newness to the buildings make them visible and attractive to visit. In addition the Sesigo Project (2009 -2013)a partnership between the Botswana Government and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has given libraries an renewed and interesting outlook in terms of ICT infrastructure. The Sesigo Project was a country wide programme to install computers and Internet for free use by the public in Botswana National Library Service Venues ( Sesigo, 2009). According to a speech given by the Minister of Youth Sport and Culture, t the closing ceremony of the Sesigo Project ( Kgathi, 1 August 2013) 72 public libraries have been fitted with computers, and 41 of those libraries have internet connection.



***Ramotswa Public Library – one of the new library buildings***

Libraries drive the *An Educated and Informed Nation Pillar* of Vision 2016 directly in that they collect, organise and disseminate information that society access and uses to inform themselves on various issues of life. However, it is submitted that the impact of the library in the attainment of the Vision extends beyond just informing and educating, it cuts across all the pillars by empowering communities through knowledge and the ability to access information for themselves it is made possible for them to solve many of their life challenges and plans. The National Library Service through the public libraries system has put in place activities and programs that are aimed at capacitating members of the public with information and skills in various ways libraries so as to

improve their lives. The programs cover educational, youth, agriculture/economic, recreational aspects. A list of the programs follows below:

### **The Programs**

**Reading clubs** – Under this program libraries bring together members of their communities to read and learn together and share what they read to encourage each other to read. This is in line with building an educated and informed nation.

**Homework assistance** – This is done in collaboration with local schools. Librarians work with the school teachers to assist pupils with their homework. This assistance helps to improve the children's performance in school and contributes towards early childhood development. Children who perform well in school become better citizens and are able to make informed decisions about the choices they make in life. These are the young people who become leaders of tomorrow contributing to a Prosperous, Productive and Innovative Nation.

**Youth computer training** – The programme is aimed at capacitating the youth with computer and internet skills. This program was introduced through the Sesigo Project and it targets the youth. One of the objectives for Vision 2016 is for Botswana to be a nation that has access to ICT infrastructure and is able to utilise technology to connect with the rest of world, and with this program libraries are helping in meeting that objective. In fact the youth have borne testimonies that access to computer and the training that they have received in libraries have helped them to achieve personal goals. This supports the government initiative for youth programmes that are intended to assist out of school youth with business opportunities and diversify the economy. This initiative supports the Vision pillar of being *A Prosperous, Productive and Innovative Nation*. By capacitating the youth with ICT skills libraries are enabling them to search the global net for business ideas and also to learn how to develop business plans for themselves. Several youth have already testified on how this training and exposure to computers has helped them to start their own businesses, improve the quality of their business and products through research on the internet, find employment or enrol with distance learning graduate programs (BIDPA, 2013).

### **Programmes aimed at assisting people living with disabilities**

Braille Literacy – The public libraries loan out Braille materials to organisations that serve people who are visually impaired such as the collaboration between Mochudi Public Library and Motswedi Rehabilitation Centre in Mochudi (a centre providing rehabilitation services to people with physical disabilities). Other institutions that benefit from this initiative include Annes Stine school for the young in Molepolole, Bana Ba Dinonyane, a program based at the Jwaneng Public library aimed at assisting pupils at Dinonyane Primary School which serves children with physical and intellectual challenges/incapacities.

These programmes enhance several pillars of the Vision, namely; being an Educated and Informed Nation, being A Moral and Tolerant Nation, being A Companionate, Just and Caring Nation. Public Libraries recognise the right of people with disabilities to lead a dignified life and with these programs the library empowers such users with skills and knowledge to be able to recognise their needs and provide for themselves.

### **Health Education**

**Life-Line** is program enrolled at the Ramotswa Public library in collaboration with the District AIDS Coordinator's Office. The main target group for this program is the youth. It is a capacity building program on health issues (in particular HIV/AIDS, Alcohol and Drug abuse), as well as to develop the participants' computer and internet skills. The other health programme that libraries conduct is the Health Talks that are facilitated by librarians. Health professionals are brought in to the library to give

talks on various health issues and librarians also utilise the opportunity to showcase information resources that they have on the health topic discussed.

### ***Sesigo Innovation Programmes***

Sesigo Innovation Programmes are a new feature introduced by the Sesigo Project through a competitive bid submitted by public libraries across the country. Ten successful programs are sponsored by Sesigo Project and the aim is to promote library access beyond computers. The innovation programmes are a start in a long service culture aimed at improving the lives of Botswana. The programmes were designed with the community needs in mind as well as government initiatives that may address the needs of the communities being serviced. The programmes range cover audiences from small children to community wide issues. A list of the programmes supported by Sesigo are noted below:

#### **The innovation programs**

<b>Library</b>	<b>Project</b>
Moreomaoto Public Library	Playground for disadvantaged children aged 2-6
Ramotswa Public Library	Providing digital content for children with intellectual disability
Library Services for people with disabilities unit (BNLS Headquarters)	ICT training and access to ICT resources for the virtually impaired
Francistown Public Library	Electronic educational games for people with hearing impairment
Kopong Public Library	Imparting textile and design skills using ICT targeting women and the youth
Molalatau Public Library	Provision of information to farmers through ICT forums
Palapye Public Library	Archiving the history of Palapye and disseminating the cultural information
Kasane Public Library	Provision of information (business) using ICT
Mochudi Public Library	ICT training and mobile ICT access
Lethakeng Public Library	Revision assistance and ICT training for primary school children (standard 3, 6 and 7)

#### **The national library association activities**

Over the past three years the Botswana Library Association (BLA) has also been addressing issues that are geared towards interrogating the role of libraries in upholding the government agenda for the National Vision 2016. In 2010, when the International Federation of Library and Information Associations and Institutions Building Strong Library Association Programme (IFLA/BSLA) was started in Botswana, a stakeholder seminar was held in Palapye and one of the key objectives of the meeting was “assess the role of the library system in Botswana in reaching Botswana National Vision 2016”. Participants came from various library stakeholders such as the National Library Service, Information management students representative, Ministry of Education, Vision 2016 Council, University of Botswana school of library and information studies, Sesigo Project, Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) representative, Botswana Library Consortium, and the University of Botswana Library. At the seminar, participants agreed that, even though there were some efforts on the ground, the library community in Botswana had not done enough to realise the Vision. BLA took it upon itself to be the forum, to give the library and information community an opportunity to interrogate the relevant issues and reflect on how they can succeed in making their

contribution towards the attainment of the Vision. The BLA conference themes that followed 2010 have therefore been;

- 2011 - *School libraries and information literacy: key to the attainment of an educated and informed nation*
- 2012 - *e-Government: the role of the Library and Librarians*
- 2013 - *Library and Information Management for Development and Social Inclusion.*

## **Conclusion**

Public libraries in Botswana have taken large strides towards supporting the government agenda to realise the objectives of the National Vision 2016 and the measures have proven to be successful. The introduction of computers in libraries improved their recognition by users and usage of libraries has increased. The report by Sesigo (BIDPA, 2013) contains testimonies that shows how successful library programmes have been with the introduction of computers and internet access; many of the people sharing their stories have been successful in business, education and employment.

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