

Greenwell Matongo Community Library as Learning Environment for Children: Broadening Learning Environment and Providing Learning Support

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Abstract

Vantaa, the fourth largest city in Finland, started cooperating with the city of Windhoek, the capital of Namibia in 2002. As a result of this cooperation a community library was established at Greenwell Matongo, an informal settlement area of Windhoek in 2005. The cooperation is a part of the North-South Local Authority Programme financed by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administrated by the Association of

Finnish Local and Regional Authorities. The civil servants of the two cities carry out the co-operation.

Over the years the Greenwell Matongo community library has become an important meeting place for the local people, especially schoolchildren and students. Today, Greenwell Matongo library is always full of students studying, reading books and newspapers, doing homework, using Internet, or attending life skills courses and other activities. The library has a reading room as well as a computer room with 23 computers. It provides regular computer courses, day camps for school children, story-telling hours and assistance with homework.

Children living in the densely populated Katutura and Khomasdal in Windhoek are mainly from households that are experiencing challenges of limited space, lack of electricity or limited access to electricity. The children live in areas where alcohol outlets, are playing loud music to attract customers. This environment affects the learning and studying abilities of the children and youth.

An example of success stories in the Greenwell Matongo library are the after school activities. The library started assisting library users, children, with school homework and guiding them in using the library effectively as resource within the community. The benefits of the homework assistance initiative yielded so much fruit that the teachers from the neighbouring schools started referring more and more learners to the library for assistance, which resulted in an increased demand for these services.

The librarian and library staff came across a need for an integrated structured after school care programme. The need for specific subject tutoring was identified and the focus on mathematics, biology, physical science and reading was emphasised. After procuring Genius Educational Software, which includes programs on all subjects from grade 0 to 12, and with the assistance of our volunteers, we could even host a summer school to help prepare specifically grade 10 learners for their final exams. The overall objective of the programme was to create an environment where learners are encouraged, supported and guided into developing their full potential. The programme aimed to promote values of caring, honesty, respect, responsibility and trustworthiness.

The Greenwell Matongo Community Library after school care programme incorporated recreational sports that actively and in a fun way enhances learning through instruments such as puzzles and chess games among others. The girl's cultural and dance group is one other element that helps shape the youth of the community.

Another example of the activities organized by the library was a spelling competition organized on the 5th of October 2013. The competitors were grade 5 to grade 7 learners from various schools. The organizers of the event described it as a remarkable experience; couple with very excellent opportunity for youngster to rise to fame one day. They also thought it could be productive and fruitful, if event of such kind could be organized three (3) times annually, in order to see a significant progress in the improvement in English language.

These are only a few examples of the many activities organized at Greenwell Matongo Community Library in order to encourage learners to reach their full potential. Today the library is

a safe environment for learning support and a model library in Namibia. The city of Windhoek will open another community library in a poor and densely populated area in Windhoek and the good practices are also shared in other parts of the country.

Vantaa-Windhoek Library Project

Vantaa City library has cooperated with the City of Windhoek since 2002. As a result of this co-operation a community library was established at Greenwell Matongo, an informal settlement area of Windhoek in 2005. The City of Windhoek had recognized a need to bring library services closer to the people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as Katutura, so as to promote a culture of reading, and further enhance access to information. The City entered into a partnership with the Ministry of Education of Namibia, the local community of Greenwell Matongo and the City of Vantaa to establish a Community Library at Greenwell Matongo Community Centre in Katutura. The plans were drafted in 2003 and construction finalized in 2004, after which the process of furnishing and equipping the library could start. One of the main tasks of the library cooperation is to bring free services of the information society to the grassroots level and bridge the digital divide among the residents of Windhoek.

The Vantaa-Windhoek Cooperation is a project between Vantaa, the fourth largest city in Finland and Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. The cooperation is a part of the North-South Local Authority Programme, financed by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administered by the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities. The civil servants of the two cities carry out the cooperation. Both cities have dedicated managerial level staff to participate in the work.

Greenwell Matongo Community Library

The Greenwell Matongo Community library was officially opened in March 2005. In 2007, also the public library departments of Espoo and Helsinki Cities joined the project, with the main responsibility still remaining with Vantaa. This not only added human resources to the project, but also serves as means of deepening the co-operation between the city libraries in the capital region of Finland. One of the main tasks of the library co-operation was to bring free services of the information society to the grass-roots level and bridge the digital divide among the residents of Windhoek. Other objectives were to strengthen the administration of library services and the professional skills of the personnel and to strengthen the cooperation with other partners such as the University of Namibia and the Ministry of Education.

Today, Greenwell Matongo library is always full of students studying, reading books and newspapers, doing homework, using internet, or attending life skills courses and other activities. The library has a reading room as well as a computer room with 23 computers. It provides regular computer courses, day camps for school children, story-telling hours and assistance with homework.

Library services in Namibia

Library services in Namibia fall primarily under the Ministry of Education through the Namibia Library and Information Directorate (NLAS). Before independence, which Namibia gained in March 1990, access to libraries was mainly a privilege of minority groups and the big majority had no access to such services. In Windhoek for example, there was only one public library, access to which was restricted to white people only, and located far from areas where most Windhoek residents live. In 2004, it was still the only public library in Windhoek. Currently, there are about 60 public libraries in Namibia, only a few of which are under the administration of municipalities.

The idea of libraries merely as lending places has been strong in Namibia, but little by little public libraries have also become important meeting places especially for children and students. In the past the libraries couldn't provide the people the information they needed and were considered as institutions that produced information to passive consumers. Now the role of the libraries has been defined anew so as to empower people from the disadvantaged communities to improve their quality of their lives. There is recognition that community libraries can become places for implementing different kind of human development projects if they are able to respond to the actual information needs of the people. Information has to reach the grass-roots level in order to really empower people. The library can only play a role in development if it provides services to all potential user groups in the community.

Community Development

Community development seeks to empower individuals, families and groups of people by providing them with skills they need to effect change in their own lives, families and communities. Information and library services in the contemporary societies have adopted a much more integrated developmental approach compared to the service provision in the past. The Greenwell Matongo Community Library was from the start planned as a community development oriented centre responsive in its service delivery, a centre that focuses on active integration of the community. Over the years the library has in practice become much more than a library. It has organized several workshops in order to empower people to improve their quality of life. There have been workshops on preparing healthy food, printing fabrics etc. Besides workshops there have been courses on how to search for information from books and on the internet.

Children living in the densely populated Katutura and Khomasdal in Windhoek are mainly from households that are experiencing challenges of limited space, lack of electricity or limited access to electricity. The children live in areas where alcohol outlets, are playing loud music to attract customers. This environment affects the learning and studying abilities of the children and youth. Many children and young people come from dysfunctional families where unsupervised hours are the order of the day. It is known that when youth in urban areas spend a lot of time on the street, a group becomes the kind of surrogate family, but with a different set of norms. The street group is seen as an alternative group with specific norms and becomes a subculture. Young people need parental guidance and support and teenagers with poor family relations may use drugs even if their personal values and their peer's

opinion are against drugs. Pressures from peers to use drugs can override personal antidrug values and even good family relations. The unemployment rate of Namibia is estimated to be at around 52%. The residential areas from which most of the children and learners come from have especially high rates of unemployment. The community members are living in abject poverty, in overcrowded houses, not conducive for reading and studying. Electricity services are not available at household level and people, especially learners and students, use candles and oil lamps that are not healthy for study purposes. The academic performances of students living under these conditions tend to be poor.

Information needs of the young people

According to surveys, young people in Greenwell Matongo area need information mostly about education and job opportunities. They are interested in information technology and health education so as to avoid illnesses such as AIDS. Other important information needs relate to motherhood and family planning, gender equality and environmental issues. To get this information they often turn to the Greenwell Matongo Library especially during holidays. They come to the library because it is near and because there are tables and chairs for studying, as well as access to Internet and other information sources like books and periodicals. Access to Internet is particularly important in a country where distance learning is the only possibility for many young people to earn a degree.

Libraries need to further develop ICT services in a way that promotes equality in access to information. Libraries need to support education and social empowerment. Community libraries are expected to give basic ICT training for community members and hand out manuals for advanced software use. At the Greenwell Matongo Community Library basic internet courses for school classes, students as well as adults are an ongoing practise. There has been a paid trainer at the library but also some volunteers have been taught to give basic ICT training to customers. The volunteers working at the library are mostly students who work at the library in their spare time and on holidays. Some of them are former school drop outs who have been encouraged to continue with their studies with the support of the library staff. Many young people feel that working as a volunteer not only helps the community but also gives the volunteers self-confidence and goals for the future.

After School Care Programme

An example of success stories in the Greenwell Matongo library are the after school activities initiated by the librarian who was appointed in 2010, who also took charge of running the programmes. The library started assisting library users, children, with school homework and guiding them in using the library effectively as resource within the community. The benefits of the homework assistance initiative yielded so much fruit that the teachers from the neighbouring schools started referring more and more learners to the library for assistance, which resulted in an increased demand for these services. The librarian and library staff came across a need for an integrated structured after school care programme. The need for specific subject tutoring was identified and the focus on mathematics, biology, physical science and reading was emphasised. The overall objective of the programme was to create an environment where learners are encouraged, supported and guided into developing their full poten-

tial. The programme aimed to promote values of caring, honesty, respect, responsibility and trustworthiness. The Greenwell Matongo Community Library after school care programme incorporated recreational sports that actively and in a fun way enhances learning through instruments such as puzzles and chess games among others. The after school care programme was a pilot programme with some of the nearby primary and secondary schools.

Other activities

In addition to the after school care programme the library has organized computer training for 5th and 6th graders and several awareness raising events and fun days for the children who don't have many possibilities for leisure activities. The backyard of the library has been improved so that the children can play football and engage in other outdoor activities, too. The expansion of the children's section is needed in the future. Yet another example of the activities carried out in the library is the "Spelling Bee" competition organized on the 5th of October. The Competition was at held at Katutura Community Reading Room, and three teams participated in the Spelling Bee. The competition was restricted to grade 5 to 7 learners from various schools. In preparation for the competition, learners were provided with a list of commonly misspelled and confused words. After the event, the participant in the competition, parents and members of the public were treated to better refreshment when each received a plate of finger snacks and some goodies bags. Each of the participants also received a book prize. The organizers of the event described it as a remarkable experience; couple with very excellent opportunity for youngster to rise to fame one day. They also thought it could be productive and fruitful, if event of such kind could be organized three (3) times annually, in order to see a significant progress in the improvement English language of local learners improve.

A safe learning environment and a model for other libraries

The Greenwell Matongo Community library is increasingly becoming a resource for the community. It provides a safe learning environment, material needed for doing academic assignments and access to computers. Also, the library personnel assist in guiding the users into effective ways of using the resources within the facility. The demand for the library facility is growing all the time. The Greenwell Matongo Community Library is every day packed with children and students doing homework, reading books, newspapers and magazines and using computers. The library offers regular computer courses for nearby schools, organizes storytelling hours, movie afternoons, book clubs, day camps, life skills courses and other activities for children and youth.

The Greenwell Matongo Community Library is not just a place for seeking information, it is also an important meeting place for the young people. In fact, the user statistics of Greenwell Matongo Library are well above those of the other community libraries in the country and therefore the concept of the Greenwell Matongo Library is now being used as a model by the Namibian Ministry of Education when planning its new libraries in other parts of the country. The Greenwell Matongo community Library will also serve as a model when establishing a community library in other parts of the city, such as the Nathaniel Maxuilili Centre at the informal

settlement area of Babylon. The Ministry of Education has agreed to continue the good co-operation with the City of Windhoek by providing personnel and books also to the upcoming Nathaniel Maxuilili Centre Library. The University of Namibia will continue placing library science students to conduct their practical training at both Greenwell Matongo and Nathaniel Maxuilili.

Dissemination

As mentioned earlier Greenwell Matongo Community Library will serve as a model when building new community libraries in Namibia. The Department of the Community Services in Windhoek has organized several seminars together with the Ministry of Education in other parts of Namibia in order to share information and give collegial support to the librarians working in isolation at small libraries. These seminars have taken place usually during the mentorship visits from Finland and Finnish partners have given a number of presentations about the libraries in Finland and about the new innovations that are not familiar to library professionals in Namibia. It is clear that these seminars have been beneficial not only to Namibian librarians but also to Finnish partners. There is also a project run by the Finnish Library Association dealing with the development of the library services in Namibia and Tanzania. Lessons learned in Namibia will be shared in Tanzania in a project called Libraries and Development.

Continuation

Windhoek experienced a population growth from approximately 335 000 (2006 estimate) to the estimates 340 900 in 2011. The density in the Khomas region is 9,2 in comparison with the national density of 2,5. The increase in the population of Windhoek resulted in the increase in the people living in the informal settlement areas which are characterised by high unemployed rate, overcrowded houses, lack of electricity, lack of community developmental facilities like community centres, halls, library and information services to name but a few essential community developmental services. As for the library services, the government through the Ministry of Education established one public library, one community library in Khomasdal, one community Library in Katutura (Soweto) and a resource Centre a in Babylon. All these interventions still cannot accommodate the fast and growing population in Windhoek, hence the contributions of the City of Windhoek through the GM Community Library, the Katutura Reading Room and the envisaged Maxuilili Community Library. The new community library at the Nathaniel Maxuilili Community Centre in the informal settlement area of Babylon is near completion. The community library will serve an estimated population of 5076 inhabitants as well as the nearby informal settlement areas which have an estimated population of 17 778. The community library will also be a facility that will service the several primary and secondary schools in the vicinity of the proposed as well as the NAMCOL, Polytechnic and UNAM students living in the area.

Conclusion

Vantaa-Windhoek project will be finished by the end of the year 2014 but the work in developing the library services in Namibia continues. It is also important to emphasize that this project has been beneficial to both sides. It has reminded us of the importance of the sense of

community and sharing best practises. Information sharing has been a vital part of this cooperation so the lessons learnt in this project can be beneficial when building new community libraries in Namibia and also when planning new library services in Finland. Greenwell Matongo Community Library will continue to give free internet courses to school groups and organize different activities for children and students to empower them and give them support so they can reach their full potential and aim for the future.

Appendix:

Lessons learnt from Vantaa-Windhoek co-operation project:

Reaching the grass-roots level

Community libraries can become places for implementing different kind of human development projects if they are able to respond to the actual needs of the people. Information has to reach the grass-roots level in order to really empower people. The library can only play a role in development if it provides services to all user groups in the community.

Promotion

The promotion of the libraries is important. Over the years many awareness raising campaigns have been organized in Windhoek. It is important to get the decision makers to understand the role of the libraries and the role of knowledge in community development.

Capacity building

The changing perception and growing popularity of libraries means that in the future Namibia will need more qualified personnel to manage new libraries. The personnel of the public libraries tend to consist of library assistants with no formal qualification. Before most of the librarians in Namibia had studied abroad but today it is possible to study information sciences in the University of Namibia, which is also one local partner in Vantaa-Windhoek project. The university has recruited trainees to Greenwell Matongo Library in order to familiarize them with working at public libraries.

Support from the local authorities

The City of Windhoek is a local authority in response to the government's decentralisation policy in Namibia. The city has actively contributed towards the process of developing library services and supported the cooperation project. The commitment of the stakeholders has built a solid ground for future development of the concept of community libraries after this project comes to an end.

Library as a safe learning environment

The perception of the library is changing globally. Greenwell Matongo library has succeeded in developing an active learning centre for the local people, especially for children and students. With small resources the library has created an information ground, a safe environment which is packed with customers using computers, learning by playing, studying, attending the story-telling hours and other happenings organized by the library staff together with the young volunteers. The message about the power of the sense of community and the importance of networking is now being spread to other parts of Namibia.

Regular contact

Regular discussions between the stakeholders are important. There are many

differences between Finland and Namibia but also many similarities in what customers want from library services.

The international role of the libraries

This project has shown that libraries have international meaning. To learn about other cultures and to be able to work in an international environment is vital to small countries like Finland and Namibia in a globalizing world. Library professionals working in this project have acquired new skills which they can put to use in new coordination projects.