
Promoting Innovation in Namibian Libraries through Leadership Training

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Abstract:

Namibian community, regional and school libraries are engaged as active development partners that support education, innovation, knowledge creation, and economic development across the nation's fourteen regions. In 2014-2015, Namibia's Millennium Challenge Account Compact further strengthened library services by constructing and equipping three new Regional Libraries, which have the capability to use the latest technologies and innovations to bring information to their users. In addition to strong collections and technology, the Regional Libraries and all Namibian libraries require strong leadership in order to deliver innovative services that further development. To address this need, the Namibia Library and Archives Service partnered with the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs to implement the Strengthening Innovative Library Leadership (SILL) training program, a project funded with support through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In this paper, we describe the methods SILL uses to encourage innovation among all ranks of library staff and then provide examples that demonstrate how the SILL training has helped Namibian libraries strengthen their services and promote community innovation and development.

Keywords: Namibia, leadership training, innovation, community development.

Introduction

Since Namibian independence in 1990, library and government leaders have invested in developing the country's libraries with a focus on redressing inequalities and strengthening library infrastructure. As a result, Namibian libraries are currently engaged as active development partners that support education, innovation, knowledge creation, and economic development across the nation's fourteen regions.

The Namibia Library and Archives Service (NLAS) has determined, however, that modern buildings, robust collections, and a well-coordinated library network are not sufficient to realize libraries' full potential as agents of development. In addition to these key components, NLAS has identified the need for strong leadership among librarians and other library staff members. To address this need, NLAS partnered with the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Mortenson Center) to bring the Strengthening Innovative Library Leadership (SILL) training program to librarians in community, regional, and school libraries across Namibia.

SILL seeks to develop and distribute easy-to-use, affordable leadership training materials that are tailored to the specific needs of librarians in developing countries and the specific leadership challenges they face in transforming their libraries to become active partners in development. Funded with support through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the SILL curriculum and materials have been created through a highly participatory process of pilot testing and adaptation.

In May 2015, a Mortenson Center team travelled to Namibia and trained 15 local trainers using the SILL curriculum and materials. Those trainers have subsequently delivered the SILL training to 121 of their colleagues in 9 regions of the country and at the NLAS Head Office. Approximately one year following the launch, librarians who participated in SILL have implemented a wide range of innovations that support development in their local communities and their regions. These activities and services reflect a broad range of national development goals related to health, gender equity, education, and small business development.

Namibian libraries

Library services in Namibia are provided through a network of community, regional, school, university and special libraries that are located across the nation's fourteen regions. This library network is overseen by NLAS, a directorate established in 1993, just three years after the country achieved independence (Namhila & Niskala, 2013; Namibia Library and Archive Service, 2015). At the time of independence, Namibia inherited segregated and unequal libraries developed under a policy of apartheid during the South African colonial period (Namhila & Niskala, 2013). In establishing NLAS, the new national government situated the directorate within the Department of Lifelong Learning in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (as the department and ministry are currently named), thus positioning the nation's libraries as strong contributors in redressing inequalities and providing equitable access to quality education for all Namibians (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2016; Namhila & Niskala, 2013).

As part of the educational system, libraries have been explicitly included in the country's vision and plans for development. This role was first articulated in the 1997 NLAS policy framework that outlined the relationship between libraries and the First National Development Plan (Harper et al., 1997). The framework specified four principles through which NLAS would support libraries to advance the development agenda: (1) providing all citizens with free and equal access to "the information they need to take control of their lives for self-development and self-reliance" ; (2) ensuring equal access by enhancing library services in underserved areas, sponsoring literacy campaigns, and providing information to meet the needs of citizens who were illiterate or newly literate; (3) enhancing quality of life at the individual level through opportunities for learning, self-improvement, and self-actualization and at the level of nation-building by providing access to

Namibia's history, diverse cultures, and rich heritage, and (4) supporting democracy by involving library users in decision-making related to library locations, collections, and service hours.

Namibian development is currently guided by the Fourth National Development Plan, which seeks to move the country toward achieving Vision 2030 (Government of Namibia, 2012). The development goals outlined in Vision 2030 emphasize enhanced quality of life for all through development of a knowledge-based economy, rapid economic growth, equitable social development, technological advancement, and development of a highly skilled workforce (Government of Namibia, n.d.; Niskala, 2008). Libraries continue to play a central role in this development, as evidenced by the activities of Millennium Challenge Account - Namibia (MCA-N). The MCA-N compact has been a key strategy in reaching Vision 2030 by providing grant funding for public investments in education, tourism and agriculture between 2009 and 2014. As part of its education initiative, MCA-N invested in the construction of three state-of-the-art regional libraries in disadvantaged regions of the country (Millennium Challenge Account Namibia, n.d.). The vision for these libraries has been to "extend beyond the traditional role of public libraries and enhance efforts to develop Namibian society, including supporting civic, educational and entrepreneurial information needs." (Millennium Challenge Account Namibia, 2014, p. 4) MCA-N has also invested in the technical assistance and training necessary for these regional libraries to operate effectively.

NLAS now has two decades of experience leading libraries to contribute to national development. Through this experience, NLAS has determined that strong leadership is a critical component that libraries require in order to reach their highest potential as agents of development. Therefore, NLAS formed a partnership with the Mortenson Center in 2015 to bring SILL to its network of libraries.

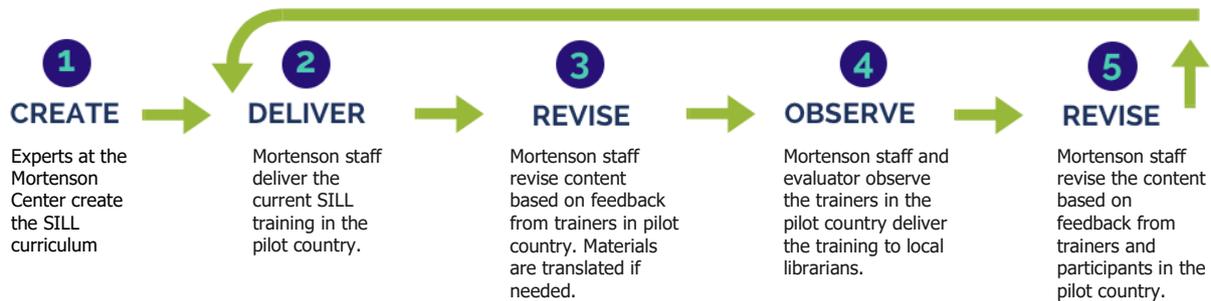
SILL training

The Mortenson Center launched SILL to meet the need for easy-to-use, high quality, and affordable library leadership training materials around the world. The Mortenson Center has offered non-degree professional development programs for librarians from outside the United States since 1991. During their extensive engagement with libraries in developing countries, Mortenson Center staff has observed that public libraries are frequently overlooked by development partners and experienced as "book-centered" spaces that are neither welcoming nor engaging. As a result, they have come to believe that strong leadership is needed to transform these libraries into "user-centered" and "information-centered" spaces that meet the needs of diverse user groups and are actively engaged in development efforts.

Mortenson Center staff has also observed that regional and country-specific Library Training Providers are eager to offer leadership training to the librarians they serve and that the librarians are eager to participate in the training. What is lacking is easy-to-use, affordable training materials that are tailored to the specific needs of librarians in developing countries and the specific leadership challenges they face in transforming their libraries. To address this need, the Mortenson Center launched the SILL project. With support through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the project seeks to create accessible, flexible, multi-media training materials for use by trainers around the world.

The SILL training has been developed with input from library training providers around the world. Currently, the Mortenson Center is midway through the process of pilot testing the training with partners in Namibia, Myanmar, India, Nepal, and Armenia. Mortenson Center trainers visit each country and train a local team assembled by the library training providers. Afterward, the trainers offer feedback and suggest improvements to SILL, which are then implemented by Mortenson Center staff. Finally, staff members return to the pilot country with an evaluator to observe the local trainers present SILL in their community, and together they determine if any additional changes need to be made. Additional pilot testing is also being conducted in Bhutan, Haiti, India, and Nepal.

Figure 1: The SILL development process



The two-day SILL training program is intended to be foundational and give librarians the confidence and skills needed for more advanced, specific library training. SILL encourages library staff to see themselves as innovators who are capable of creating change in their libraries and communities, instead of accepting the status quo that change must be implemented from the top-down. The goal is for every participant to leave the training with the confidence, ideas, and strategies that will enable them to position their public libraries to meet critical needs in their community and drive development.

The training is comprised of four training modules:

1. Leadership Styles for Librarians
2. Library Leaders as Innovators
3. Library Leaders as Planners
4. Library Leaders as Communicators

The first module, “Leadership Styles for Librarians” introduces 6 different leadership styles and asks the participants to identify the style they typically use. They then learn strategies to adapt their leadership style to fit different situations. The training then moves into the “Library Leaders as Innovators” module, which provides an overview of global trends in library innovation. The participants also begin to brainstorm ideas for an innovative new program or service that can be implemented in their library. The participants then create an action plan for their innovative idea during the “Library Leaders as Planners” module. This activity gives them the opportunity to think through how they will implement their new program or service and allows them to leave the training with a tangible plan, budget, and timeline for their new initiative. The participants then practice presenting their action plans in the “Library Leaders as Communicators” module, and they learn strategies for pitching ideas to colleagues with different communication styles.

Problem solving is a major component of the SILL training, and examples of common problems that librarians face are embedded into each training module. The participants are asked how they would take ownership of the problem and what questions they need to ask before solving the problem. The training also emphasizes that mistakes are a common part of leadership and innovation. Instead of quitting when a plan doesn’t work or a mistake is made, the participants are encouraged to examine the problem and try a different solution.

The SILL training curriculum aims to create a fun, interactive environment where the participants take ownership of their learning. Instead of lengthy lectures, the training is comprised of individual and group activities, icebreakers, self-assessments, small group discussions, role-playing, and individual action plans. The local trainers are encouraged to adapt the training to fit local needs by using community-specific examples, photos, languages, and technology. This collaborative, adaptable training program encourages new ideas and innovation by encouraging the participants to explore their strengths and innovative qualities through activities and discussion instead of through lectures.

Library innovation to promote Namibian development

Since completing the SILL training, Namibian librarians have designed and implemented a wide range of new library activities and services with the goal of creating change in their communities. These services and activities reflect a broad range of national development goals including improving health, fostering gender equity, preserving national heritage, supporting business development, and facilitating learning.

Namibia's Ministry of Health and Social Services has identified HIV as one of its three focal diseases along with tuberculosis and malaria (Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2016). To stem transmission of HIV, the Ministry has launched a male circumcision national campaign aimed at encouraging men of all ages to get circumcised as a promotion of hygiene and to reduce the incidence and transmission of HIV and other diseases. Information about this type of health topic is vital to all citizens; however some citizens are unable to reach health facilities. Libraries, therefore, are working together with health institutions to promote health and hygiene programs to the public. Recently, librarians at Oshakati Public Library invited nurses from the state hospital to provide information on the male circumcision campaign. Library users who sometimes have limited time to visit the health facilities were provided with the necessary information at the library. The newly-built Oshana Regional Library has also launched new health-related endeavours. Here, a volunteer was hired to conduct yoga sessions for children at the library. The purpose of this activity is to keep children fit and healthy, keep children busy with something useful at the library, as well as raising the interest of young people to visit libraries. The yoga activity takes place after children have finished with their homework help and studying.

Gender equality is also a key component in Namibian efforts related to development. Improving the status of women and girls is essential for them "to realize their full human rights, to contribute to, and to benefit from economic, social, cultural and political development" (Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, n.d.). As a result of SILL, libraries are offering knitting and sewing projects that train girls to be active citizens and independent innovators and teach them skills that can help them to be self-sustainable in the future. The Warmbad Public Library has organized sewing classes for unemployed ladies in the town to share their skills and patterns and to assist each other. The long-term plan for this project is for the participants to have the ability to come up with innovative ideas and generate income to sustain their families. Participants in a knitting project at Oshakati Library successfully knitted the seats and table covers for their library, and that project has subsequently cascaded to different libraries in the Oshana Region.

Libraries are also supporting nation building by helping to preserve and provide access to Namibia's rich cultural heritage. The Katima Mulilo Library staff has begun to collect information from the elderly of different tribes in their community including Khuta, Mayeyi and Chincimane Khuta. Information about their beliefs, traditions, and norms is being recorded and will be stored in the libraries in the region where various users will be able to access it.

The success of Small and Medium-Sized Entrepreneurs (SMEs) is a critical component of economic development. To support local SMEs, Oshakati Library organized a training workshop on successful business operations. The aim was to train SMEs on the basic skills of operating a successful business, strategic marketing of products, managing a business venture, and financing and loan accessing schemes. An entrepreneur who specializes in business management, marketing, entrepreneurship, logistics and supply chain facilitated the workshop.

Library staff members are also advocating for the involvement of community members and other stakeholders in the library literacy programs. In the past libraries carried out outreach activities on their own. Through SILL, however, they have been introduced to innovation and advocacy concepts, and librarians are now inviting other stakeholders such as artists and key people in the community to assist in reaching out to people. In one case, a library in Otjozondjupa invited the Army Brass Band and cultural dancing groups to entertain attendees during a Readathon activity.

The Okalongo Community Library is also planning an innovative strategy to provide more community members with access to library services. Situated in a semi-rural settlement area, library staff members realized that many children cannot make use of the library after school hours due to the long distances between school and homes and also because children have to attend to house chores after school hours. The library is making plans to invite children, with their parents' permission, to spend a night at the library under the supervision of the librarians. The children will have activities such as reading competitions, story-telling, read aloud, dramas, quizzes, computer games, hide and seek information games, basic computer training and watching children's movies.

In order to provide these development-related services, the library must effectively share its message with the community. Several libraries are now using the radio as a means to reach their communities. Oshana and Katima Mulilo Libraries initiated a 30 minute children's program on the Namibia Broadcasting Corporation Oshiwambo Radio Service, an indigenous language radio station that broadcasts in the north of the country. Journalists interviewed children who described their reasons for visiting the library as well as the services, resources, and materials that they use in the library. The children also read stories, told stories, and motivated other children who do not visit the library.

Namibian libraries need to ensure a supply of well-trained professional librarians in order to continue to support the nation's development. The library sector is facing an acute shortage of professionals countrywide (Iivonen et al, 2012). The long-term plan currently being explored is to market the profession at schools with the goal of developing learners' interest in the field and their ability to take up the course at the tertiary level. To advance this plan, librarians in the Otjozondjupa and Oshana regions introduced new school advocacy programs. They have begun making scheduled visits to secondary school learners through which they market librarianship as a career, the availability of job opportunities and professional development, and the range of benefits learners will have upon taking up the course of librarianship.

These examples are just a few of the many new services and activities that have been introduced in community libraries as the result of the SILL training on leadership, advocacy and innovation.

Conclusion

The partnership between NLAS and the Mortenson Center has brought SILL training to more than 130 Namibian libraries in 9 regions of the country as well as at the NLAS Head Office. Just one year later, these librarians are embodying new roles as innovators and drivers of change at the library level and the community level. These librarians are employing their confidence, ideas, and strategies to meet critical needs in their community and to drive development locally, regionally, and nationally.

NLAS and the Namibian training team are also contributing to the on-going development of SILL. Drawing on Namibian pilot testing and feedback, Mortenson Center staff has revised the SILL curriculum and materials to better meet the needs of librarians around the world. The Mortenson Center is currently continuing to test and refine SILL through partnerships with library training providers on four continents. In 2017, the completed package of SILL materials will be available free-of-charge to trainers worldwide.

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