Expected roles of Libraries in developing Smart Cities: The case of Accra, Ghana

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Abstract:

Accra is evolving into a smart city. Technology is being deployed in the city to improve everyday activities of the inhabitants including banking, commerce and information sharing. Libraries might be adjudged irrelevant to the ongoing conversation on Smart Cities when one considers the depth of internet penetration and availability of smart phones to a large number of the population. Governments and opinion leaders assume that every citizen living in Accra city has access to a safe place in which to engage with free relevant and life-saving information. They have neglected the role libraries play as the social, technological and intellectual hubs in national development and are focusing only on technology as the means of innovation for Accra city.

The paper focuses on the role libraries must play in the development of Smart Cities. Libraries equip citizens with digital skills which are prerequisite for full interactions and seamless participation in Smart Cities. The challenges affecting libraries and prohibiting them from maximizing their full potentials of being the social, technological and intellectual infrastructure hubs are also explored.

The paper encourages librarians to actively tell their stories and raise awareness of services they offer that can contribute to the making of Smart Cities.

Keywords: Accra, Smart Cities, Technologies, Library roles, digital skills

Introduction

Accra is the capital city of Ghana with a population of 2,087,668 (Ghana Statistical Service, June 2019). It has the 2nd highest population with Kumasi Metropolis having the highest population in Ghana. The Government of Ghana in her quest to make life easy for citizens is infusing technology into most of the service providing organizations.

The Government of Ghana on 28th March 2013 launched the National Urban Policy Framework and Action Plan. The Policy outlines the challenges in urbanization and the initiatives to achieve the objectives set out to address the challenges. A few of the challenges outlined include Weak Information, Education and Communication Strategy; Limited Data and Information on Urban Centers; Environmental deterioration; Inadequate urban infrastructure and services; Increasing Urban Insecurity as well as Weak Urban Transportation Planning and Traffic Management. The Government's intention to address the challenges and make Accra a Smart City is using technology as the driver for innovation has negotiated with other Governments on different aspect of the economy, for example, China Development Bank (CDB) on the Railways Project to ease the traffic congestion in the urban cities including Accra.

Although the Policy outlines initiatives to address the challenges, the Government requires effective access to authentic and up-to-date information, which can only be achieved through the library. Libraries have the responsibility to provide access which leads to networks and opportunities in development. This role cannot be ignored in the era where technology has become an answer to several problems.

Using smart solutions to improve livelihoods in Ghana

As part of the efforts of the Government of Ghana, an e-services platform has been created. This platform consists of some of the Government institutions that have been digitized, including Ghana Police Service-Criminal Investigation Division (GPS-CID), Ghana Passport Office, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority (DVLA), National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), Land Registration, Retirement and Pension Scheme, and Ghana National Service Scheme. In addition, digitization of documentation and process of import and export within the Ghana Ports and Harbor Authority is making it possible for importers to track their wares.

The Minister of Communication in February 2018 launched the Smart Communities Project which will install Wi-Fi into public places such as schools, hospitals, banks, police stations and market places. The project is being piloted in the Brong-Ahafo and Western Regions of Ghana to find out the impact on citizens and help bridge the digital gap between those in Accra and other regions. Libraries have a responsibility to assist the citizens acquire the necessary skills to understand, interact and use such technologies. Access should not be limited to information and data but must be extended to technology, skills, and opportunities as well as safe spaces for citizens.

The Mayor of Accra in his opening address on 11th September 2017 at an event in Accra mentioned the steps outlined to achieve the Vision of making Accra a Smart City. A few of them include Smart Transport i.e. having Wi-Fi connectivity and fitting electrical sockets in buses and trains to make it easy for commuters to charge their electronic devices; installing Intelligent Traffic Lights with sensors and CCTV's to manage the traffic congestion in Accra; Smart Education Systems using computers to teach in all schools and distribute computers for students, and ensuring Smart Revenue Mobilization which will eliminate human intervention

in the collection/payment of taxes. He continued that steps are being taken to ensure Smart Waste Management that will recycle waste into reusable items thereby making Accra the cleanest city in Ghana.

Citizens living in Accra have access to technology in different forms if they have the skills to interact with the facilities. Examples of facilities in operation includes:

- Electronic selection to the Senior High Schools in Ghana to giving opportunity for every child to have access to Secondary Education.
- Interoperability between the communication companies in Ghana thus making it easier to transact businesses regardless of the network platform.
- Utility companies currently issuing electronic bills which could also be paid using a digital platform as the mobile money payment services.
- The introduction of e-Justice system to enable a court user to electronically file cases and complaints, and track their status, as well as make online and mobile money payments for court transactions. E-Justice using the Law Court Complex in Accra, which houses 44 High Courts for as pilot phase. (Ghana Judicial Services, June 2019).
- Financial Institutions are improving on their services using ICT e.g. installing ATM's with self service facilities for customers (depositing, checking of balance, mini bank statement as well as withdrawing monies).
- Banks in collaboration with communications companies provide easy access to withdrawal and depositing of money using mobile money services.
- Online shopping.

Living in Accra is becoming sophisticated as several private estate developers have emerged and are providing residences with technological facilities such as Wi-Fi connectivity, CCTV camera, elevators to mention but a few for those who can afford. Examples are Devtraco Plus apartments located at the middle of Labone, and sandwiched between Osu/Cantonment and Trasacco estates on the Spintex road. There are many other residential towers like Chateau Towers in the heart of Osu and Clifton Homes in Cantonments. The Government of Ghana has made an effort to provide affordable accommodation for public and civil servants but without certain facilities.

Various hotels and resorts have also been built to meet the growing demands of businesses in the city. A few of them are the Airport West Hotel, Golden Tulip Hotel, Accra Marriot Hotel, Holiday Inn Accra, Movenpick Ambassador Hotel, Kempiski and Novotel Hotels.

In the midst of all the technological improvement in Accra, access to digital skills remain a prerequisite to fully interact with the changes mentioned above and libraries remains the only safe meeting place for access to information and technology resources. Although the Accra Central Library organizes ICT training for the basic schools within the Accra Central, it should be expanded to other suburbs in the Metropolis. In the midst of the roles libraries in Accra must play, several challenges are obstructing their efforts to perform. Libraries must tell their success stories and advocate for total inclusion into the system and recognition of their effort to humanity.

Expected Roles of Libraries in Accra

Access to Authentic Sources of Information

Libraries remains authentic sources of access to both electronic and print information. As repositories of authentic sources of information, it is important to develop strategies to provide effective access to information that are relevant, timely and useful to the citizens for timely decisions. Dissemination of the information must be in different forms and format to meet each user's need. As Accra is becoming a Smart City, citizens living in Accra require information to enable them identify, understand and interact fully with new technological development in the city. Libraries have the responsibility to identify technologically innovative information for citizens. Local libraries must also form alliances to provide information on businesses, academics, and social activities within the City of Accra. They must raise awareness of the information resources available to the general public. They could also repackage certain vital information into local languages for people who find it difficult to read and understand the English language.

Having access to authentic information is critical to both individuals and national development. As an inalienable right of human beings, it must be available in the right format and form, right quantity and timely. Therefore librarians must provide effective access to information.

Access to Technology and a Safe Place

Libraries must provide access to technologies such as computers, online access to networks and connection because it serves as the only safe place for citizens. The Accra Central Library provides access to technology for citizens' i.e computers, printers, and photocopies as well as the Internet. Although the facilities are not adequate, it serves the basic schools within the Accra Central. The Library must be equipped with adequate ICT facilities to serve as technological hubs for citizens within Accra who cannot afford on their own, not only for basic school children but the general public. The computer lab must be open at all times for citizens to easily access their emails, type and print documents.

Access to Skills Development

The Library must serve as a safe place for both formal and informal skills development and acquisition. Technological infusion in some infrastructure must not be limited to the middle class in society but to everyone ready to acquire. The Library must open up and offer basic digital literacy and digital skills training to make life easy for the citizens. Citizens living in the City of Accra requires digital skills to interact appropriately with the technologies being developed. A few of the digital skills training could be on:

- Software packages: for reproducing and manipulation of digitally created document such as MS Suites: (MS Word, MS Excel, PowerPoint, Access etc.) and Google Suites: (Google Doc., Google Sheet, Google Slide etc).
- Information searching skills: ability to use search strategies effectively, identify good from bad sources, and be able to navigate different types of content eg. PDF, graphics or word. Searching skill will also assist citizens to identify and download certain Apps relevant to making life easy onto their smart phones.
- Use of computers, laptops, mobile phones or smart devices

Other training that could be organized by the libraries in Accra include:

- How to use E-Banking services eg. ATMs in banks
- How to use a Social Security and National Insurance Card to check one's contributions made before retirement age.
- How to book a taxi using the Apps
- How to use Google Maps for directions using digital addresses
- How to track import and export documents.
- How to use the e-justice or the Electronic Case Management System (ECMS) to improve Court User engagements with the Courts via portals.

The library could also convert spaces available into focus meeting spaces for people with equal hobbies. Technology Club could be established for the youth to learn new skills, share and exhibit their knowledge in ICT. Volunteers with strong programming skills could be encouraged to train the youth on programing.

Apart from the digital skills, a career expert could be contracted to advise the youth on choosing a career. Entrepreneurial training could be organized for the youth to acquire skills.

Challenges

Although it is a global policy that public libraries must be established, funded and maintained by public taxes, yet most Governments in Africa turn a blind eye to the important role played by libraries. Public libraries in Ghana (Accra) are not exempt from the challenges in Africa constraining them from performing their duties satisfactorily. Below are a few challenges:

- Lack of adequate funds from the Government,
- Lack of qualified ICT professional staff
- Inadequate infrastructure (ICT equipment, access to internet, and sometimes electricity)
- Lack of advocacy and negotiation skills

In addition to the above, most public librarians refuse to look beyond the library with the notion that Government is the sole funder of the Library. A surprising aspect is that a large number of citizens are not aware of the services and resources available to them free of charge at the library. As a result, some perceive the library as a place for the rich in society. Inadequate public and community libraries in Accra as well as lack of innovative programs for all ages is a challenge as most people must walk long distances to visit a library.

Facing the challenges

In order to face the above-mentioned challenges, more public libraries should register to become members of the African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA). AfLIA serves as the voice for libraries at the national level by advocating for good library policies to be added onto the National Development Agenda through the Ministers in charge of libraries. Example of such advocacy is meeting with the Ministers in country or organizing the Ministers Summit which has been organized twice by AfLIA. It is also a known fact that acquiring, using and maintaining technology is capital intensive and requires frequent flow of funds. Librarians require negotiation skills to negotiate for resources (financial resources, technological equipment, e-resources and print resources). Public librarians must be encouraged to enroll into Continuous Professional Development Programs such as the AfLIA INELI-SSAf Program and AfLIA Leadership Academy (AfLAc) to acquire such skills. The curricula of library schools in Africa should be assessed and modified to include advocacy and

negotiation, project management and partnership. Public librarians must acquire digital literacy skills to be able to develop innovative programs for clients of all ages. The Library must employ professional ICT staff (Master's Degree holders) to manage the ICT facilities within the Metropolis. Librarians must tell their stories using the media to engage with Government Officials, as well as the general public. Services and resources available at the Library must be made known to the public and the government officials. They should offer special services to the decision makers of the Metropolis by disseminating specified information to them to aid decision making.

Innovative programs should be made a national program to involve the decision makers. For example the Ghana Library Authority has declared 2019 a 'Year of Reading' and are inviting District Chief Executive Officers to read with children. Parents should also be invited to be part of some of the programs to motivate children. Programs like basic ICT skills should be organized for the senior citizens within the Metropolis to engage at the library. Libraries could organize an ICT competition among schools in Accra to motivate the users.

Conclusion

Smart cities the world over have the main objective of driving socio-economic growth and development to improve the quality of livelihoods through technological use. Technology alone cannot drive economic growth and improve livelihoods. It should be supported by the provision of current and timely information which can be provided by libraries and information centres.

It is the view of this paper that libraries have been playing a key role in the national development agenda of Ghana and can, therefore, play a significant in the development of Accra as a smart city. They should therefore position themselves to play that role with support from governmental and non-governmental agencies.

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