

**The library: a vital space for the construction of the personality and social insertion.  
The urgent necessity of conducting actions of marketing, advocacy and lobbying for this  
institution**

*English translation of the original paper: “La bibliothèque : un enjeu vital pour la construction de la personnalité et l’insertion sociale. L’impérieuse nécessité de mener des actions de marketing, de plaidoyer et de lobbying pour cette institution.”.*

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*The text of this document has been translated into English and differences from the original text may occur. This translation is provided for reference purposes only.*

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**Abstract:**

*This communication aims globally to help lobby actively the decision-makers in order for them to put the public library and more specifically the children and young adults library at the centre of their agenda. We have insisted on the urgent necessity for the librarian to reflect on his own occupation and the approach that he uses to reach his customers. If the librarian isn't well-trained and skilled in making relevant and attractive propositions to users and politicians, it will be difficult for him to be recognized and, more incidentally, for the library to be taken seriously. The libraries associations have been largely called to carry the voice of the sector and to be the first defenders of libraries and librarians next to the community and decision-makers. The library keeps on being one of the rare places for literary, artistic, democratic, technologic expressions, open to all and for all. We must never forget it.*

**Keywords:** Library, youth library, attractive library, marketing, advocacy, professional associations.

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Nowadays, the public/community library is an essential lever for the social, economic and educative development of the child, the young person, the human being full stop. In some places, the library is even more the principal place of mass socialisation and intergenerational reunification. In the African environment, most of the time, it seems that the States, both at a national and a local level, haven't yet realised the importance of the usefulness, the extreme necessity of libraries ; more specifically the youth libraries (children and young adults). However, it's in this institution, real bridge between the school and social, even professional life, that we have to give to the child, the young adult and the adult, the skills that they need to achieve a productive socialisation.

It becomes imperative for all the professionals of the book, reading, education and TIC sectors to apply pressure on the « decision-makers » in order for them to put the creation, the support and the development of libraries in general and more specifically the youth ones at the heart of their agendas.

To better lead those marketing, advocacy and lobbying actions, we can ask ourselves some questions :

- 1) Which decisive actions could we lead to better « sell » the corporate image of our libraries ?
- 2) Which points should we put forward responsible authorities, professional organisations and training schools to achieve efficient advocacy/lobbying?
- 3) How do we build strong and attractive libraries in perfect balance with young people's needs and wishes ?

With the help of innovative and concret examples, we offer some food for thoughts and actions in the development of this communication.

## **1 Which decisive actions do we have to conduct to better « sell » the corporate image of our libraries ?**

The observation is clear : in the Subsaharian Africa, the library is not always seen as essential. As a result of this frightening analysis, it is convenient to question ourselves on this largely widespread perception in our context. First of all, let us say that our responsibilities are shared, the underestimated image of the information services is due just as much to the « decision-makers » as to the users and also, sadly, to the professionals themselves.

### *The decision-makers,*

« Decision-makers » means here all those that have at their command a power that can give the means (material, financial, logistic, jurisdictional...) to be attractive to existing libraries, to create new ones and to put the libraries at the heart of the public development policies. They are the government and the elected members (local councilors, members of parliament, senators). By observing, we can see that most of those responsables are considering the libraries as an « useless and non urgent » organisations, they estimate sometimes that schools are already educating children and young adults, that adults are already working to feed their families, that other social services like building schools and hospitals are the only emergencies. When a library exists, they assign personnel whom they can not do anything else with, sometimes it's sick staff or with doubtful professional ability ; much worse, sometimes they are cousins, nephews, friends that don't have any professional

qualifications and that they « help » to earn a living. All that because they don't see the role of the library, even less, of the community/public library.

Here is the « perception » that numerous decision-makers have.

The logical consequence is that it exists very few decent libraries, even in the political capital cities in Subsaharian Africa, I don't even want to mention the situation in periurban or rural areas. When one or several libraries exist, they are often disrepaired, consequence of their lack of esteem. Few libraries have an autonomous budget (operating costs, purchase, investment, training...)

*The users,*

The users (readers, visitors, artists...) haven't, culturally, the reflex to come in a library to read, look for information, share their know-how. There is always a juxtaposition, even a mental competition between the library and the school, or the cultural centre ; people don't see the point of going to the library because they read at school or they go to the cultural centre to show their artistic performance.

Here is the image that a large part of the Subsaharian African population has of the institution that is the library.

*The professionals,*

Librarians and documentalists themselves devalue sometimes their occupation. It is common to see unmotivated colleagues, who do not have any accurate action plans, don't open libraries with regular opening hours, don't look after their physical apparence, are seated behind their desks and are playing more a « books guardian » role than are acting like real librarians.

Yes ! This is an uncompromising photography of some colleagues whose the professional behaviour can not encourage neither decisions-makers to take their work seriously, nor users to « feel » the importance of the librarian, and of the library as a result.

All that can not « sell » our library image at best. So, what to do to invert the trend ?

## **2 Actions to lead to actively advocate/lobby the users, authorities, professional organisations, training schools**

To better « sell » the image of our institution, THE LIBRARY, next to our environment (social, academic and political), we need to be proactive in making a case for a better understanding of what is the library and what it isn't, its central role in the community.

We have to put objective arguments, make everyone understand that the library is :

**1 A place to live:** it's the « third place » after the home, working place or school. This « third place » is a community hub where everyone, for different and varied reasons, meet after work or school outside the family place.

- 2 **A cultural place :** the public library is a public space for debate, exchange and therefore a place for the construction of the democracy and Human Rights. It's a place for actions and cultural mediation.
- 3 **A place for memory:** the library is, in some contexts, a place where the memory, or at least a part of the memory of the community, literary or artistic, is accessible ; often for free, sometimes low cost.
- 4 **A place for socialisation:** the library asserts itself clearly like a place of « popular education » where are mixed together several generations of people, boosting by this way the intergenerational knowledge transmission. The library promotes the tolerance, put both gender next to each other, even in some societies where gender apartheid is common.
- 5 **A place to meet:** the library put itself sometimes as one of the only meeting places (in rural areas, in little towns...) where people can bump into each other, discuss, chat up, study, play, get together...

Those advocacy arguments directed to « decision-makers » can rightly be relevant to them only if they detect an important critical mass (huge number of visitors for example), which is interested in the library.

We enter straight to the point in the heart of the matter : **Make libraries attractive.**

To appeal the users, the professionals have absolutly to change the habits often observed. It is urgent to them to :

- 6 Conduct permanent marketing actions aimed at children, young adults and adults in order to raise awareness on the importance of the library
- 7 Offer several types of media to users. The « book is king » era is over. Nowadays, even if the book, as print medium, is very important, we have to consider that electronic contents, Internet... are largely used.
- 8 Offer a cultural program with attractive cultural events which talk to the public, are of interest to the community, in which people recognised themselves.
- 9 Put themselves in the service of the users. To stop with the « books guardian » who only loan and get back documents, and really act as mediators.
- 10 Open up to other actors (teachers of the nearest schools, artists, opinion leaders, intellectuals...). Stop thinking that the librarian knows, can say and do everything, in short, stay humble.

All those attitudes imply an update of staff skills ; some of them have been working for decades and are not training anymore. I am talking here about the necessity to promote the continuing professional development. Professional associations and training schools are here brought to mind. More associations than schools because the professionals gathered in those ones form an enviable critical mass that, not only can share knowledge (some colleagues are training others), but also can also put pressure on politicians (Ministers, mayors, members parliament) for them to provide budget necessary to the continuing training of the librarians in specialised schools, in seminars, in the country as well as outside its borders.

We have been implying, between the lines, that we need to promote a library culture in our communities. This means that we have to initially interest the younger ones the library.

### 3 How to build strong and attractive libraries in perfect harmony with the youth needs and wishes

The children, the young people and the adults have wishes and needs that are often different to those of the adults. In a previous article, I wrote that “a library is more visited by adults who have developed, with more or less difficulties, the passion of reading when they were younger ; we can really talk about the “texto generation”. The children and young adults often think that reading is “wasting time” and that it is far more convenient to use TIC ; so far, it is not excessive to think that it is firmly a “techno generation”.” I carried on “Both approaches described above are, from our point of view, complementary to the intergenerational dialogue in our public reading libraries ; the final aim is to get those two generations closer, texto and techno, so that both the book and the Internet end up being both winners, to everyone's pleasure.

We just need not to « force » the younger ones to do what they don't want to, but to consider their reality. Today, it is wiser to spread the cultural program of the youth library on Facebook and others social networks, on the library's website or blog, by SMS... than doing it only by simple written information at the entrance of the library.

In this approach, it is aglobally a matter of helping this category of public to gain the skills to better construct themselves, offering them a more eclectic culture at the library, matching their daily lives and ambitions better. We have to rethink the spaces to make them more comfortables and adjustables. We need to strongly select in the documentary choice, to reflect the taste and wishes of this public. We need to « decentre » from the book to promote the « hybridisation » with other media such as DVD, CD, Blu Ray, video games. We have to bring this public to improve, beyond the « knowledge », the « know -how », promoting, for example, the artistic education.

All those specificities require inevitably to rethink the youth library from the architecture to the furniture, the painting, etc.

#### **Biography.**

Aged of 35 years old, librarian, founder and director of the Centre for Reading and Cultural Events (CLAC) of Yaoundé since 2007. Charles is vice-president of the AIFBD (Francophone international Association of Librarians and Documentalists – [www.aifbd.org](http://www.aifbd.org) - ), member of the standing committee of the IFLA section « Libraries for Children and young Adults », member of the consultative council of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the project « Global libraries » in Africa. **Charles Kamdem Poeghela** has published several articles in professional journals and books.

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