

Improving people's lives: measuring Harare Public Library's contribution to individual and community wellbeing

Najma Patel

Library and Information Service: Camps Bay, City of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.
E-mail address: najma.patel@capetown.gov.za

Janusz Skarzynski

Library and Information Service: Fish Hoek, City of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.
E-mail address: Janusz.skarzynski@capetown.gov.za

Mary Nassimbeni

Library and Information Studies Centre, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.
E-mail address: mary.nassimbeni@uct.ac.za



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Abstract:

Since 2008 public libraries in South Africa, after decades of neglect, have been recipients of significant extra funding from government in a programme to transform urban and rural public library infrastructure, facilities and services. The programme, the Conditional Community Libraries Grant, targets previously disadvantaged communities by building new and refurbishing old buildings with the objective of providing and improving library infrastructure and services to meet community needs and to promote a culture of reading.

Given the low levels of literacy and book ownership and low frequency of voluntary reading, government's mandate to public libraries and its willingness to provide extra funding is understandable. The findings of research by the South African Book Development Council showed that only 14% of South Africans are active book readers, and that only 5% of parents read to their children. Book ownership is very low – 51% of households did not have a single book in the home.

What has been lacking, however, is research showing that the extra funding is achieving its objective of empowering communities, promoting reading and improving literacy rates. In the light of this lacuna and with the purpose of finding evidence for the difference that a public library makes in a community, we carried out a research project in a new public library in an impoverished township of Cape Town – the Harare Public Library. An additional motive was to test the feasibility of crafting a

methodological approach that could easily be adapted by other public libraries in the City of Cape Town to measure their contribution to community and individual empowerment.

In our paper we describe our methodological approach, present findings that speak to the link between access to information and reading materials in a public library and community and individual development, and reflect on prospects for adapting our approach to other public libraries in an effort to sustain the public library's engagement with measurement.

Keywords: Public libraries, impact assessment, societal value, community and individual well being

Introduction

Minister Mthethwa in 2014, announcing the continuation of the “conditional grant” with R3 billion rand (\$241,506,120) during the budget debate of the South African Department of Arts and Culture, alluded to the contribution public libraries make to communities. The grant, a continuation of the R2.7 billion conditional grant already spent since 2008, is to be invested in public libraries from 2014 to 2017. This expenditure, however, is being made in an information vacuum. No national norms and standards for public library services are currently in place and there are little or no informative performance assessments for the public libraries in South Africa (South Africa. Department of Arts and Culture, 2013).

Globally, there is a necessity for libraries to prove their value. The emphasis has shifted away from outputs that merely look at how the services are used, to outcomes and impact that consider how these resources and services offered by the library benefit and change people's lives. Huysmans and Oomes (2013:6) point out that ‘there is a growing body of national and international studies that have attempted to measure the value of public libraries to their communities’. This is reiterated by Vakkari and Serola (2012) who have highlighted the need for research that shows the long term benefit to society of the provision of a public library service.

There has been increasing pressure on public libraries to show their value. With a global trend towards declining circulation and the integration of new services into public libraries, there has been a realization that traditional output measures are not providing the necessary detail of how library users are benefiting from using the public library. Increasingly there is a move towards impact studies to assess the contribution a public library can make to its community.

In the South African context in particular, there is an increasing need to find a way to measure public library performance. The importance of the library's value to communities is reflected in initiatives by the South African government through efforts such as the South African Public Library and Information Services Bill (to be tabled) and the *Library and Information Services Transformation Charter* (published June 2014), both of which include principles of monitoring and evaluation. The

Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development highlights that ‘Access to information supports development by empowering people, especially marginalised people and those living in poverty’ (Lyon Declaration, 2014). This reaffirms the importance of demonstrating the library’s benefit to the community.

In this context we undertook to investigate the viability of applying the impact assessment approach in the hopes that, despite the different environment, the methodology would transplant into a developing community context.

Harare Public Library was selected as a site for this research since the library serving the community only opened four years ago and it was hoped that the resulting impact would be easier to determine within the community. Harare is a sub-section of the suburb of Khayelitsha outside of Cape Town, has a population of 28 971, living in both formal (52%) and informal (48%) dwellings and has an unemployment level of 37% (City of Cape Town, 2013). The library was constructed and partially stocked using funds from foreign donors (Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading and Carnegie Corporation) and the City of Cape Town. It would be beneficial to be able to prove that the establishment of this library has made a positive impact on the community in order to justify this expenditure and encourage further investment in public libraries.

Harare library can be seen as the vanguard of a movement towards addressing the lack of investment in public libraries in previously marginalised communities. If libraries are to be a vehicle of development that assist in redressing the imbalances of South Africa’s past, Harare library, a purpose built facility of over 1000 square metres could act as a model of what a modern urban public library in South Africa could, and possibly should be: it includes a dedicated early childhood development section, a games room to attract young adults (teenagers), extensive study space and it has more connected PCs available to the public than any of the other community libraries in Cape Town.

Public libraries in South Africa

Public libraries in South Africa are currently experiencing a minor Renaissance. The Department of Art and Culture has endorsed the Transformation Charter detailing the steps needed to provide an equitable library service to the people of South Africa. As a signatory to the Lyon Declaration, South Africa has started drafting a bill that will legislate norms and standards for public libraries nationally. According to the *Project report for the costing of the South African public library and information service bill* (2013), commissioned by South African Department of Arts and Culture, South Africa has 1408 public libraries. The Public Library Bill proposes a standard of 4170 public libraries, but the shortfall of 2762 reflects that South Africa has 34% of the required public libraries. We are seeing efforts nationally towards increased funding and political support for libraries. Deputy President

Cyril Ramaphosa recently used Harare Public Library as a platform to launch his reading club initiative.

Despite this support and investment in building public libraries, South Africa has poor literacy rates particularly in English as a second language. Research shows that only 14% of the population are active readers, 5% of parents read to their children while 51% do not own leisure-reading material (South Africa. Department of Arts and Culture, 2006).

While both the South African Public Library and Information Services Bill (2010) and Library and Information Services Transformation Charter (South Africa. Department of Art and Culture, 2014) require monitoring and evaluation to take place, there is no cohesive method currently used to ascertain public library performance (De Jager & Nassimbeni, 2011). The current capacity utilisation measure of book circulation will add little value in a society with no reading culture. In addition, current methods of evaluation do not address the need to meet the stated goals of public libraries as listed in both the Lyon Declaration (2014) and Library and Information Services Transformation Charter (2014).

If we are to try and justify this massive expenditure, we need to adopt a method of public library evaluation that has the backing of a recognised standards authority and is able to measure the public library service beyond the restrictions of capacity utilisation. We need to understand the impact of these new libraries we intend building.

Impact assessment Methodology

“Best practices in Monitoring and Evaluation tell us to focus on impact rather than outcomes. Similarly, the modern library should not assess its value based on the quantity of services provided or number of people that walk through their door—but rather based on the true, long-term, substantive impact on the lives and livelihoods of community members.”

(Dara Lipton, 2012)

Library and information services around the world, in developed and developing countries, have adopted impact assessment theory in order to measure library performance (Streatfield & Markless, 2009; Huysmans & Oomes, 2013; Poll, 2014; Lyon Declaration, 2014). The formal acknowledgment of this theory’s standing in the field of Library and Information Science was the publication and adoption in 2014 of the *ISO 16439/2014- Information and documentation – Methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries* (International Standards Organisation, 2014). The basis of the theory lies in positing a link between an individual’s interaction with the public library (service or resource) and the resulting change in behaviour (positive or negative).

Poll (2014) identifies one-on-one interviews, focus groups, discussion groups and surveys. Surveys or questionnaires are the preferred method of assessing impact and can be done via telephone, online or handing a print copy to users at the library (Poll, 2014). The survey is made up of a series of questions designed to elicit responses from the participants which relate to benefits they have experienced as a result of using the library, either from a one-time visit or ongoing interaction (Poll, 2014). The questions should be designed to include:

- how users acquire information, skills and knowledge;
- how their study, research, learning and work is supported;
- whether there has been saving of time and effort;
- the benefit of the quiet, safety and comfort of place and the library as a place where people can communicate and make contact with others Poll (2014).

Poll (2014:5) emphasizes further that ‘The answers will help to interpret what respondents say about perceived impact’.

Research design

Our preferred choice of instrument was a paper-based survey as the access to users via electronic communication would’ve been limited. For this investigation a questionnaire was designed to gauge the impact of a public library opened in 2011 that serves this community.

A questionnaire with 25 questions was drawn up. The four sections included: **A.** participant demographics to profile the visitors to the library and to see if these visitors matched the demographics of the official census; **B.** Library use, aimed at reflecting what visitors were doing at the library during their visits; **C.** Library computer-facility use, what people used the computer facilities for; and **D.** Library benefit which indicated any perceived benefits for the visitors. Three of the 25 questions were open ended. The design of the questionnaire was influenced by the work of Streatfield and Markless, in particular their book, *Evaluating the impact of your library* (2012), a practical study carried out by Chiessi in 2011 and advice from Dr Roswitha Poll (2013). Since this study was done before the publication of the ISO standard it was not used as a guideline; however, we did receive comment from the members of the ISO Standards committee. We believe that we have achieved the standard described in the ISO publication.

To eliminate the language bias, the survey was translated into isiXhosa, the predominant home language of the people in the area. This was done by the City of Cape Town’s translation service and, as a further check, isiXhosa speaking colleagues were asked to test the translations. This offered people the option of answering in the language they felt most comfortable with.

A formal pilot test was conducted to test the effectiveness of the instrument. This was carried out at a public library in a community with similar demographics. During the formal pilot the researchers found that although most people were isiXhosa speakers, they preferred to answer the questionnaires in English. When asked about this preference, most said that English allowed them to answer more succinctly - the words were 'shorter'.

The final survey was conducted inside the Harare Public Library to exclude non-users of the library. The questionnaires were administered in the month of May 2014, over a full week, during library opening hours. The chosen week was representative of a typical operational week. The questionnaires were handed out to visitors by facilitators who offered help with answering the questions, if needed. The facilitators were tasked with recording a daily door count and retrieving completed questionnaires.

Over the course of the six days, 3745 visitors entered the library of which 266 were prepared to participate in the study. The 266 questionnaires were completed and returned, constituting a 7.1% response rate. It is important to note, that based on feedback from the visitors, in response to a question about the frequency of their visits, 26% visit the library every day while 45% indicate visits of two to three times a week. These responses indicate that daily visitors were not unique, making the sample size smaller and hence the response rate higher. We estimate a response rate in the region of 11%.

Results

In order to determine if we had achieved a representative sample of the population, a comparison was made between the demographics of the sample and the census data from 2011. The unemployment status variable for the respondents stands at 32%, which is comparable to the official census results (City of Cape Town, 2013). The gender demographic statistic of the region (City of Cape Town, 2013) puts females at 48.9% and males at 51.1%. The respondents constituted 56% male and 40% female (4% did not answer), which is fairly representative of the population demographic.

There was an age bias towards those under 40 years (88%), and 50% under 25 years of age. This is consistent with official census statistics, and it shows that many of the older members of the community are not making use of the library. The users are predominantly from three groups: school learners (26%) students at tertiary institutions or completing correspondence courses (20%) and the unemployed (32%).

We queried language preference, in part to determine the library’s collection relevance to the community using the library. The following results indicate a preference for English as a language to read in despite the home language being predominately isiXhosa.

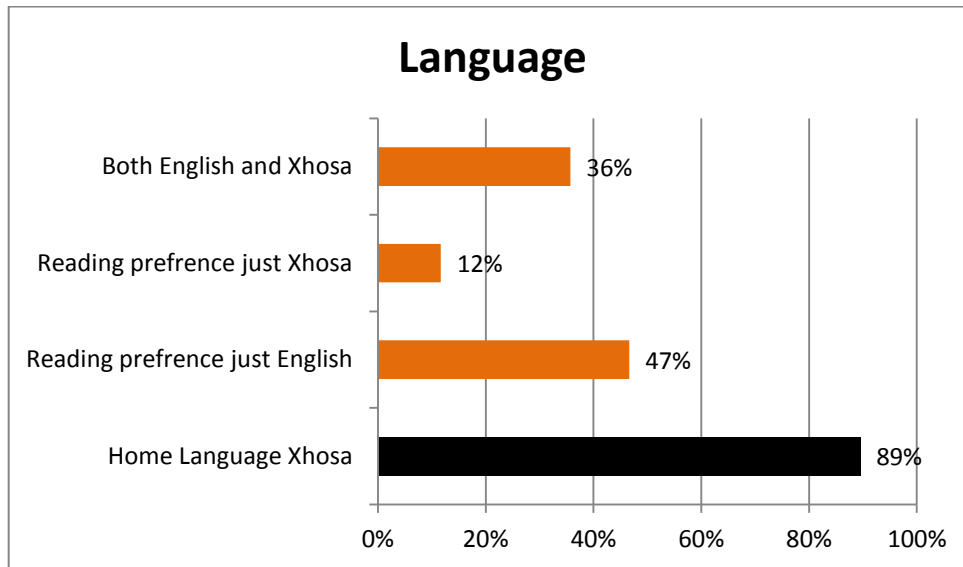


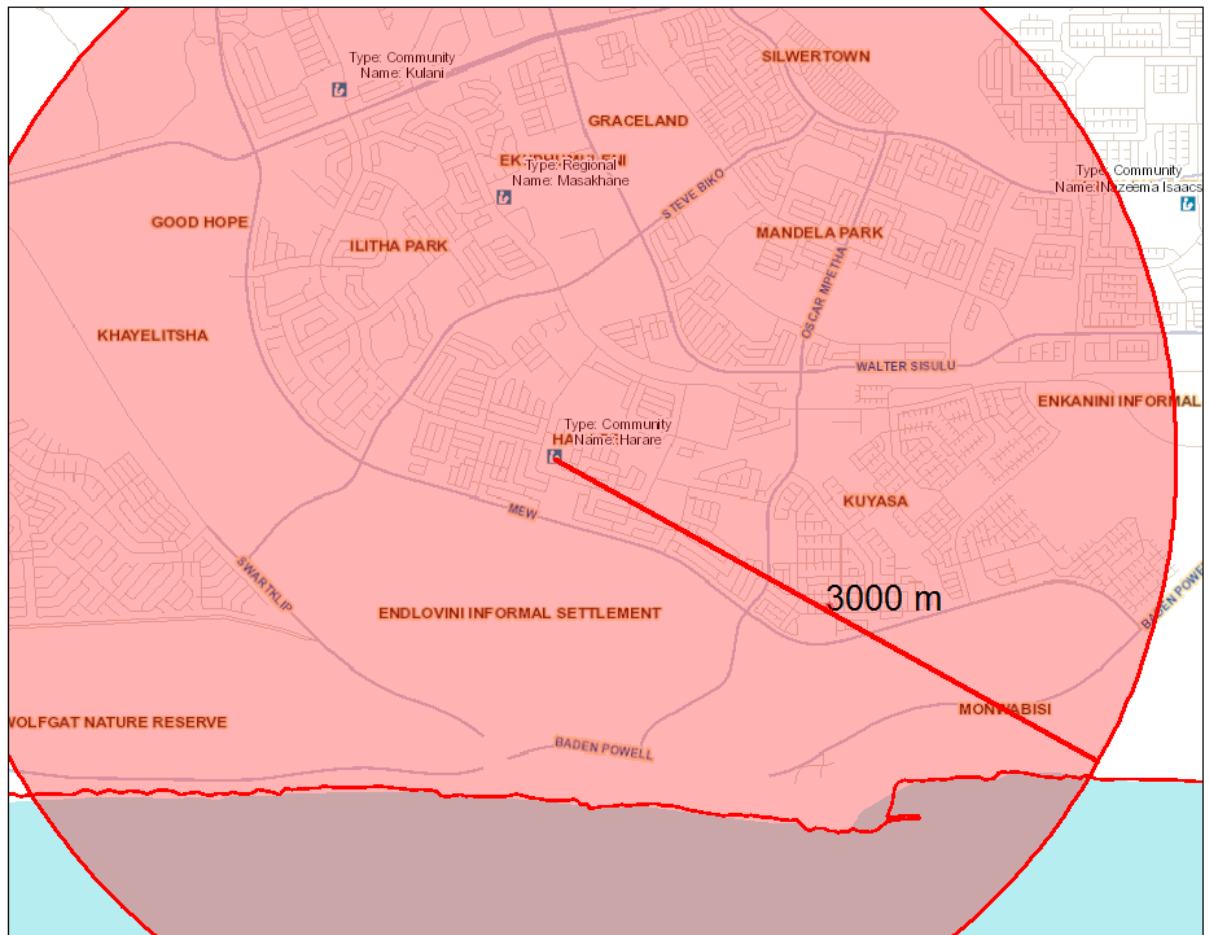
Figure 1. Language

Accessibility

To ascertain the accessibility of the library in relation to where people live and how far people are prepared to travel to visit the library, we asked respondents to indicate on a map the estimated position of their place of residence. The following table reflects the percentage of people living within a 3km radius of Harare library.

| Suburb of Residence | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| 56% | Live in Harare |
| 16% | Live in Endlovini |
| 5% | Live in Litha Park |
| 8% | Live in Kuyasa |
| 3% | Live in Mandela Park |
| 88% | Live Within 3km of the library |

Table 1. Suburb of residence



Map 1: Map of Harare and surrounds (Source City of Cape Town GIS)

While only 46% of people made a mark on the map, the majority of the people surveyed (56%) indicated that they stayed within the suburb where the library is located. Another 32% live in neighbouring suburbs, which are all within a 3km radius of the library.

Of note are a significant 16% of users who come from the informal settlement of Endlovini that borders Harare. This informal settlement, one of the smaller and newer communities of the greater Khayelitsha, is characterised by shack slums, has a young age profile and has the highest rate of unemployment in the area (Poswa & Levy, 2006). This puts the community of Endlovini at a greater material disadvantage.

While 36% of respondents had used another library in Cape Town or Khayelitsha before Harare library was built, they had now chosen to use Harare library because it was closer and easier to reach. They also felt that the facilities offered were superior to those at neighbouring libraries. This was determined by analysing the responses to the open-ended questions.

In response to a question about what the respondents had done before the library had been built, 37% of the participants who answered this question indicated that they would have spent this time at home doing activities like homework or watching television. Another 36% used another library prior to the opening of Harare Public Library and 5% made use of Internet cafes. The representative comments below illustrate what respondents did before Harare Public Library was built:

'I spent time at another library but for me it was too far going – hours - but now I am taking 10 minute to come to the library. I don't spend lot time. I am so very happy now.'

'I would go to Cape Town or Litha Park library which is very far so the library has been very helpful.'

'Internet café, using lot of money, printing.'

'Wandering around.'

'I was sitting at home watching TV.'

'I mostly spent my time at home doing nothing. Sometimes I would just go and play or chill with my friends.'

'I spent it playing with friends in the street.'

'I spent most of my time at home sleeping, watching television and studying. I sometimes went shopping at the mall or hanging with friends.'

'I spent a lot of time at home, I have words that I don't know their meanings of and I did not have any skill in computer (meaning I was blank when it comes to computers).'

A study done by Pillay (2006) looked at the experiences of learners from informal settlements and the difficulties that they face living in townships. It is evident from responses from learners in this study that the library offers respite from these challenges. This is echoed in the response from one of our survey participants:

'Yes it's the place where I can study after school hours because in townships there are lots of noise and disruptions.'

The eifl report (2011:19) indicates that 'libraries are also considered as ideal places to study'. Our results support this finding as over 30% of respondents wanted more tables for study and work and a significant 70% wanted longer opening hours when asked how they could derive more benefit from the library (see Figure 2).

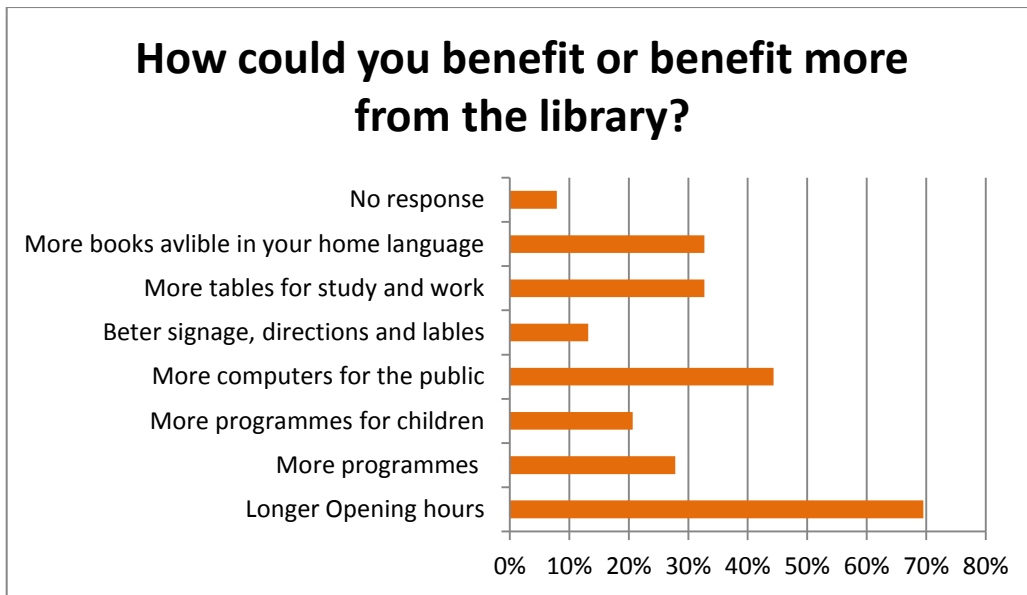


Figure 2. How could users benefit more

Benefit of library use

In response to the question about library use, the borrowing of items does not feature as primary use of the library facility. While 74% of the respondents have library cards, these cards are used infrequently to take out books.

The primary reasons for using the library for the bulk of the respondents are to:

- use the computers,
- use the photocopier,
- work or study,
- look for jobs (either online or using newspapers)
- do research for formal educational purposes.

These responses are presented in Figure 3, 4 and 5.

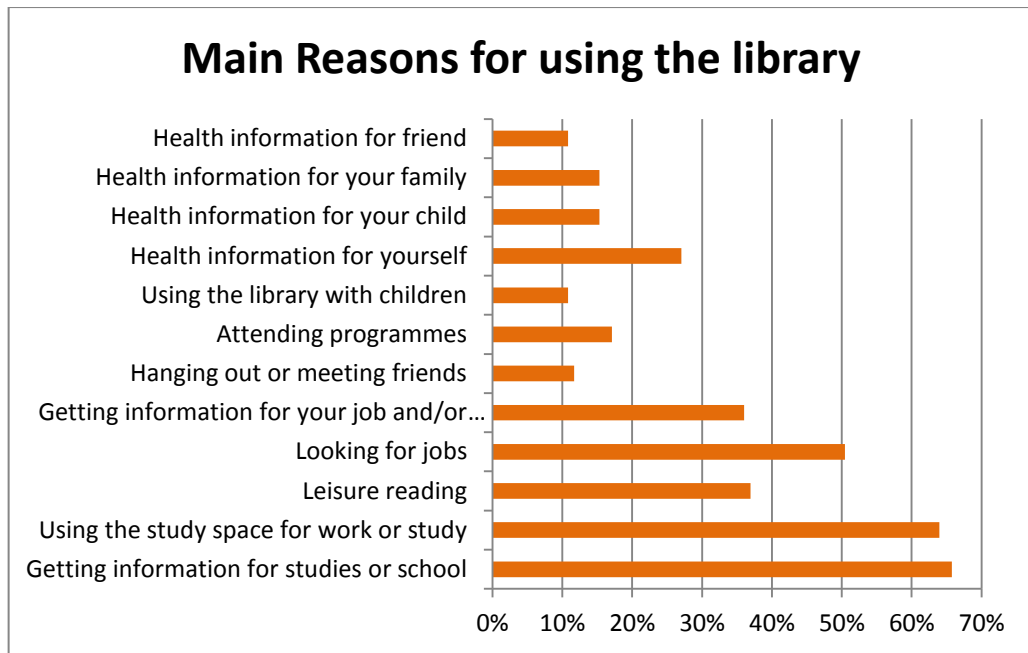


Figure 3. Reasons for using the library

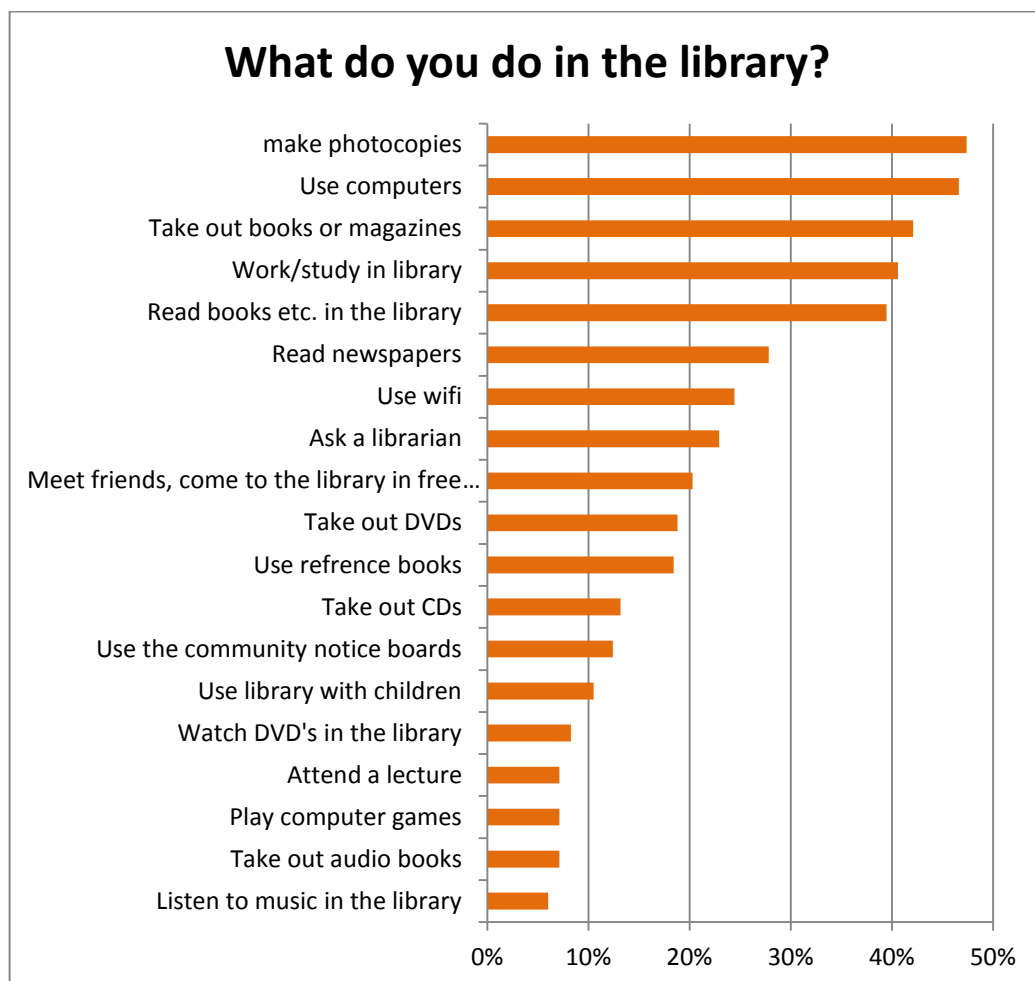


Figure 4. What people do in the library

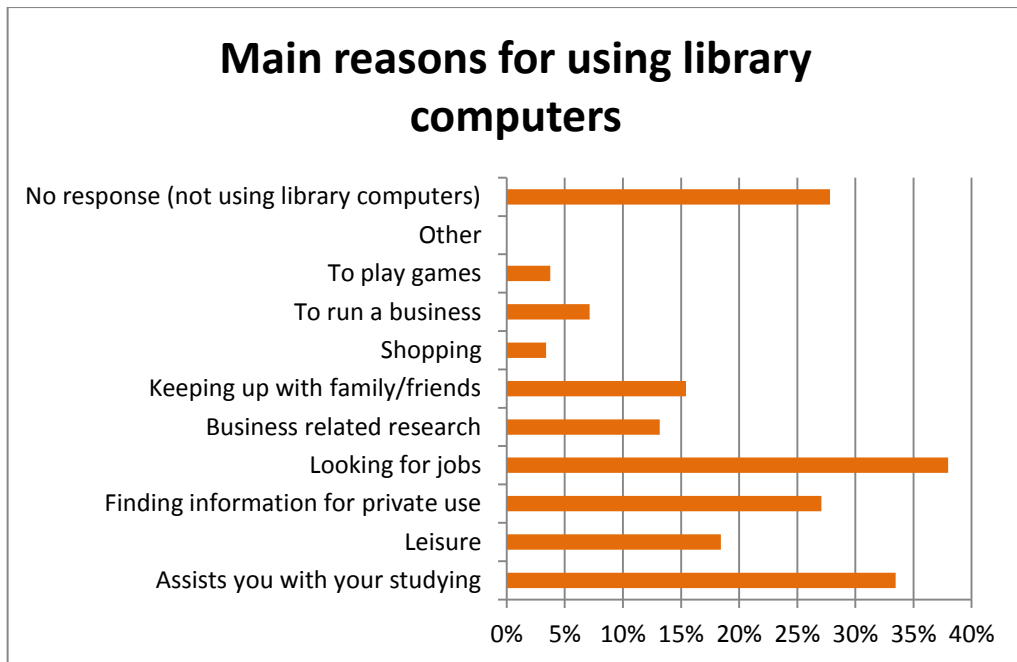


Figure 5. Reasons for using library computers

Huysmans and Oomes (2013) point out the importance of a distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic value of the public library. Intrinsic value is the immediate perceived benefit of using the library. An intrinsic category of benefit would be the 64% of respondents who felt that the use of the library computers had contributed to some improvement in their skill with computers. Another example would be any benefit received from attending a workshop or course at the library. Extrinsic benefits happen over time and are the additional consequences of an activity. These benefits are more difficult to ascertain and could possibly be extracted from responses to one of the later questions, ‘If you had not come to Harare to look for information where would you go?’

In response to this question, 28% of the respondents who have never used a library before (but now use Harare Public Library) indicated that if Harare Public Library were not available they would now use another public library. We believe that this shows a realization of the long-term benefit of using a public library, and could be interpreted as a change in behaviour or a potential extrinsic benefit. The same inference can be drawn with the use of Internet cafes. Before the library opened, 5% of respondents used Internet cafes. A significant 34% of respondents said that if the library were not available they would then make use of an Internet café. The service offered by the public library has made a positive change to their information seeking behaviour and provided access to computers and Internet.

There is no doubt that the majority of the members of the public using the library felt that they had received some form of benefit (see Figure 6). In many cases it is the very tangible provision of

resources that are prohibitively expensive or unobtainable for many people in South Africa (Internet access, computers and a safe, quiet space). In addition, some had received training at workshops hosted by the library.

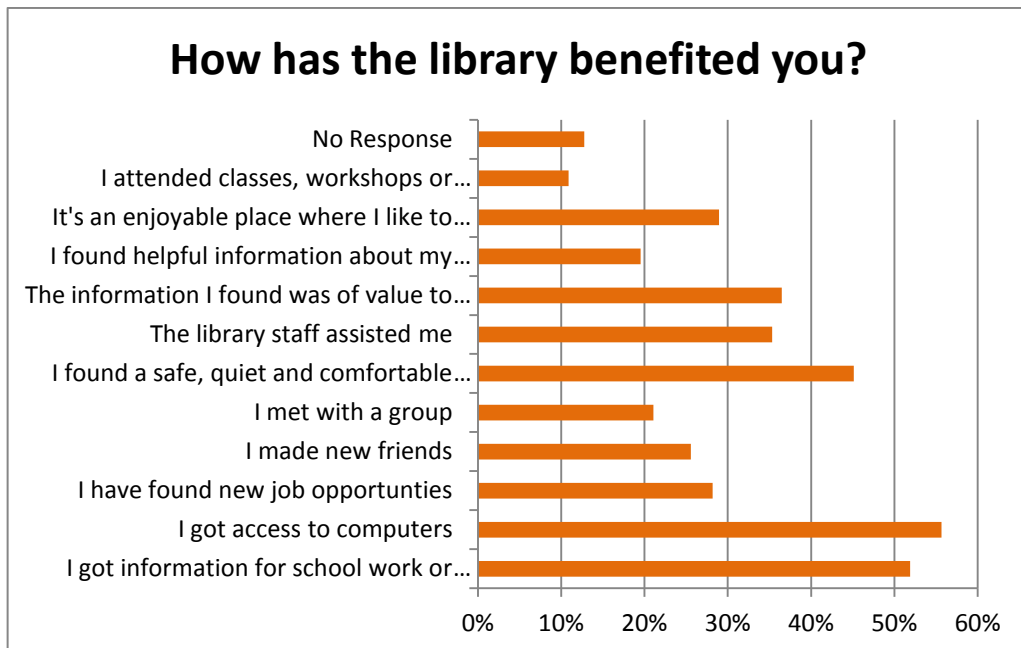


Figure 6. Benefit derived from the library

The less tangible benefits provided by the library are potentially of greater value than the tangible. The social connection created between the visitors to the library and staff as well as other community members can only serve to improve levels of social cohesion, as reflected in Figure 6 above. One area that the library users recorded a noticeable improvement in, as a result of using the library, was their computer skills (see Figure 7).

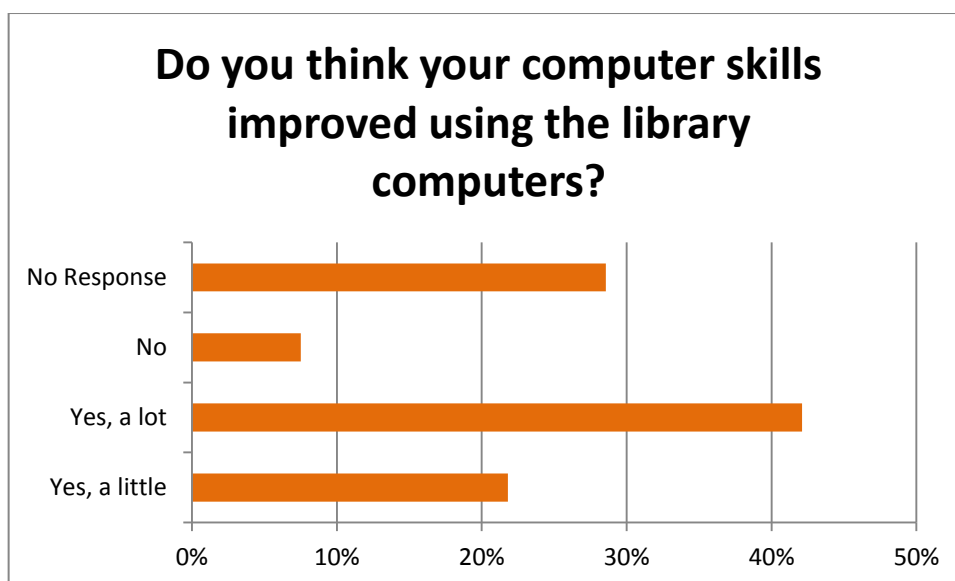


Figure 7. Computer skills

In light of the research results this particular library can be seen to support two areas predominantly: formal education and employment-seeking. Other areas of impact, such as social interaction, improved health, growth in cultural and lifelong learning are less pronounced.

Space

The value given to the space, safety and comfort provided by the library is emphasized by answers to the open-ended questions. Respondents articulate the benefits, as illustrated by the following comments.

'I like that it is beautiful and spacious and very comfortable. It is the perfect place to study.'

'It's big enough space to study.'

'It has got big capacity you do not feel crowded.'

'The way it is built. I like the design.'

Of the 134 people who responded to the open-ended question: *'Is there anything you especially like about the library?'* 34% identified as positive features either the pleasing aesthetics of the building, the space within, or the quiet or the cleanliness. Peace, quiet and safety were also rated as important elements of the library experience. The following comments reflect these experiences.

'You got all the time to do your homework and read your book. There is no noise and nobody that is interrupting you.'

'If I don't have quiet time to study at home, library is a safe place and quiet place to study.'

'Yes, it's a quiet place where you could do your work without being disturbed.'

'When I'm at the library I've got a peace of mind and it's easy for me to focus.'

'Is quiet and comfortable and it's safe.'

Other Studies

In a recent paper, Poll (2014) looks at impact studies that are being conducted in public libraries internationally over the past ten years. The surveys range from a nationwide scale to a library level. Nine of the ten listed impact assessment studies were conducted in Europe and, this one, in Harare, South Africa. Context specific assessments are important, as they take into consideration challenges unique to a community. These challenges, when addressed, ultimately relate to both community and individual wellbeing.

To illustrate responses to similar questions of public library use, from a developed and developing country, we looked at results to questions from the Huysmans and Oomes (2013) survey conducted in the Netherlands and our own. While a direct comparison is not possible, since the studies differed in approach and sample size, we feel that we can compare the results of public library use.

The following graph, Figure 7, reflects these responses.

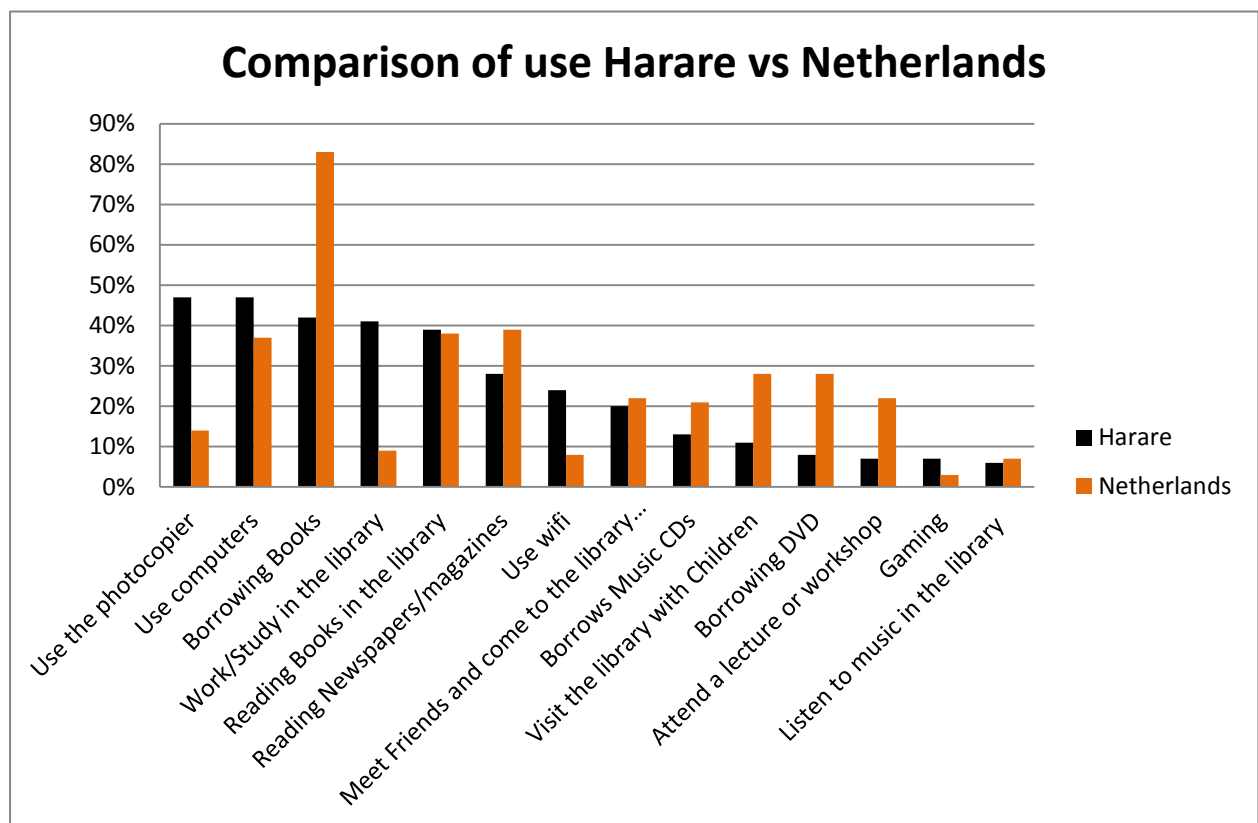


Figure 7. Comparison of result from impact study in Netherlands and the one conducted in Harare South Africa.

Conclusion

The Lyon Declaration clearly identifies that access to information plays a crucial role in the development of people’s lives and ultimately their communities. Libraries as intermediaries facilitate this development by not only honouring people’s right to information but offer space, access to ICT and a connection and access to cultural heritage, for example. A demand for impact assessments investigating the role of the public library in benefiting and improving people’s lives, relates directly to the ethos that underpins the Lyon Declaration.

The results from this survey clearly show a change in behaviour of many people following the building of the new library. Whether it is in offering a peaceful and safe space for students and

learners, or opportunities for improved skill in using ICT and empowerment through the access of ICT, we can draw the inference that the library has contributed to improving people's lives.

Poll (2014:6) highlights the importance of the library's role in improving people's lives because 'It can affect the social and educational conditions in a community or region'. It is clear also that the introduction of the library has offered a diversion from sometimes idle activities that people engaged in before there was a library.

The introduction and influence of this new library space can best be summed up with a comment from one of the respondents:

'This Space is an incubator for thought and planning.'

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