Applying an ecological model for library development to build literacy in rural Ethiopian Communities

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Abstract:

The recent IFLA (2013) statement on The Role of Libraries and Development asserts the key role of access to information and the work of librarians as agents for development. This paper describes a training program for community librarians in rural Ethiopia that aligns with these roles. Structured in an ecological framework of library programs (Asselin & Doiron, 2013), this one and a half year program convened fifty librarians from across all regions of the country to learn how to design their own programs, to be responsive to their particular contexts, enable inclusion, build partnerships and to serve as action researchers. Throughout the program, librarians documented ways they attained a set of seven standards to support the literacy and learning for all members of their community. A new initiative in preschool literacy and producing and using digital texts is introduced as heralding a major role for community libraries in national directives. The paper concludes with discussion of the challenges facing these progressive libraries and the need to recognize the complex balance required to establish a strong network of such community libraries, each having both an individual and regional/national identity.

Keywords: ecological framework, library, partnerships, Ethiopia

1. **Background**

For over 25 years CODE-Ethiopia (C-E) a non-governmental and not–for-profit organization, has increased access to books to support literacy and to contribute to the creation of literate

environments in rural Ethiopia. To date, this organization has established and stocked 97 community libraries (CLs) in remote, rural and under-served regions of the country. Building on this success, and by developing a library training component, current (C-E) library training programs are conceived in a four dimensional ecological model which includes contextual fit, inclusion policies and practices, strategic community partnerships, and continuous action research (Asselin & Doiron, 2013). Drawing examples from a comprehensive series of librarian training workshops, this paper describes how C-E community libraries apply this ecological model to contribute to the advancement of literacy in rural Ethiopia, specifically through the design of innovative reading promotion and literacy programs for adults, including women and children.

In Ethiopia, 43% of the population in the age range from 15- 60 cannot read or write. Early literacy support is now recognized as a neglected and critical component of national literacy development. Assessments of Grades 3 and 4 vocabulary, and listening and reading comprehension assessments reveal serious concerns about the lack of access to suitable reading materials and the quality of primary grade reading instruction (US AID, 2011). For example:

> …assessment shows shocking results in oral reading fluency and reading comprehension, indicating that students are slow readers and do not understand what they read. It also shows that in Oromiya, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Sidama only 1 in 6 children had any reading materials (other than textbooks) to learn from. The assessment results also shows that providing books to children or encouraging families and communities to have books at home improves literacy outcomes in Ethiopia (US AID, 2011, p. 5).

Additionally,

> …even though the purpose of mother tongue instruction is to ensure that children understand what they read, the children's inability to decode the words means that they were unable to understand the text. The gap between the reading comprehension and listening comprehension scores is consistently large, and shows that the problems identified by this EGRA are specific to teaching reading and having access to materials to read, and not due to language issues in the children (US AID, 2011, p. 5).

Evidence of the situation with early reading, points to the desperate need for response by CLs in terms of building larger collections of reading materials for young children while working in partnership with schools and families in promoting reading and developing early literacy skills. How CODE-Ethiopia CLs are taking up these challenges will be addressed in this paper.

Ethiopia's goal to join middle-income countries by 2023 will not be possible without improving literacy rates. Low literacy rates mean limited ability:

- to access education or healthcare;
- take advantage of opportunities for employment; or
- participate in social, economic and political decisions that directly affect individual lives.

In response to such global agendas as the *Millennium Development Goals* (UN, 2014) and United Nations' *Literacy for All* (2003), numerous projects and levels of reform from modest to large scale are being taken up by a variety of organizations and government in Ethiopia. CODE-

Ethiopia operates in this context. As this paper was being written, C-E received funding from the international non-government organization, EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) to launch an innovative digital book project to respond to emerging government early childhood policies. The project expects to address the gap in supporting the critical early years of literacy development. This new CL project will be highlighted later in the paper as it builds on both the current local language publication program of C-E and the belief that the CL has a major leadership role in family literacy in the community.

Current Ethiopian government initiatives position literacy and lifelong learning as essential elements of community development. National reform in early/primary school literacy education is underway with new curriculum, new teacher and student materials, and revised teacher training as foundational pieces to implement by 2019. In addition, national adult literacy programs have targeted 30,000,000 people to attain functional literacy by 2015. CODE- Ethiopia library programs influence the success of these policies.

The rise of libraries in under-served areas brings a new perspective to their formation and role in comparison with the traditional public libraries of the African colonial period. Today, libraries are conceived as 'serving the needs of the majority of the people, especially in developing communities where the provision of information services has become crucial' (Mostert, 1998, p. 72–73). Most important, community libraries 'have to be established by the communities themselves' and 'information would have to be appropriate to the needs of particular communities, which implies sustained input from them' (Stillwell, 1989, p. 267). A continent-wide push to produce mother tongue materials means that libraries will be a major place of access for such materials. Despite global trends of hyperconnectivity for information environments (IFLA, 2013), books remain scarce resources in Ethiopia. Books continue to be the basis for quality education, reading promotion and raising literacy levels. They provide information and inspiration, and underpin the economic, social and cultural development of communities throughout the country.

Given the potential pivotal role of libraries in global literacy and education agendas, IFLA calls upon all stakeholders 'to recognize that libraries, in every part of the world, can be reliable mechanisms for underpinning the delivery of sustainable development programmes' (IFLA, 2014). To this end, Krolak (UNESCO, 2011) explains that:

> ...libraries must go beyond providing organized collections of quality materials to pro-actively reach[ing] out to remaining parts of the community, for example by visiting them with appropriate reading and literacy materials in their classrooms, families, workplace or other community locations . . . and organis[ing] creative and interesting programs in the library, such as reading and writing competitions, book clubs, author readings, creative writing classes, summer reading programmes, study support, discussion groups, celebrations and festivities, exhibitions or storytelling sessions. Such programmes can also enable adults with low literacy levels, who might have negative memories of formal schooling, to take their first step back into learning' (p. 22).

Librarians in CODE-Ethiopia's community library system have been part of a training program that addresses these types of library roles and activities.

## 2.	The CODE-Ethiopia librarian training program

As part of its community library (CL) initiative, CODE-Ethiopia (C-E) has developed an extensive training program that has carried out workshops for a number of years to train library staff primarily in management and collection development activities. In their most recent phase of library development (2012-2016), C-E has added an extensive training component incorporating the principles and strategies associated with reading promotion and literacy support. This phase of the training program was developed by the authors of this paper. This team developed a series of three, one-week workshops delivered face-to-face with 50 library staff from different regions of Ethiopia. Workshops focused on skills in library management and developing a comprehensive library program based in principles of reading promotion, literacy support and increasing the culture for reading throughout the respective communities. Participants were immersed in an active learning environment where they worked on real-life problems facing them in their communities and established explicit goals for getting their particular community library programs off the ground.

After the first set of workshops (November 2012), participants had detailed tasks they were expected to complete by the next set of workshops (April 2013). In April, they brought documentation of their work and shared their successes and challenges with their colleagues. Examples of documentation included photographs, working manuals, plans, children's drawings as responses to stories, a list of girls in reading clubs, library signage and displays, and the production of a local newspaper. After participating in another week of workshops during that month, participants embarked on more advanced tasks to complete and document. They returned for the final week of workshops in November 2013 at which point they engaged with a team of Lead Librarians, individuals designated by their Regional Bureaus of Education for library advocacy work (more about this group below).

Image 1: Librarian training 2013, small group discussions and displays

3.   **Planning the community library program within an ecological framework**

To support the ongoing growth of CL programmes, an ecological framework for CLs was proposed by Asselin and Doiron (2013) as a way to position libraries as central players in personal, social, cultural and economic improvement in their communities. The framework consists of interrelated and interdependent components:
   a. context/environment;
   b. inclusion/equity/social justice;
   c. partnerships/interactions; and
   d. action/research.

Each component reflects the role and purposes of CLs and provides a framework for actual day-to-day sets of activities and initiatives that form the library program. In this sense, libraries and librarians must work to be an integral part of their community's culture, development and identity, and they must take up equity issues relevant to their communities through their services and programs. They must also take leadership roles in building connections, collaborations and partnerships with all vital sectors of their community, and they must become lifelong researchers and learners in their work to ensure that their programs and services bring meaningful change in the lives of all community members.
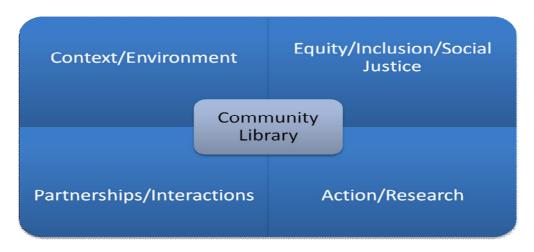

Image 2: An ecological model for community library development (Asselin & Doiron, 2013)

Using this model as a framework for discussion, the following sections of this paper share examples of how it is being used in the CL development in the CODE-Ethiopia (CE) organisation.

4.   **Context/Environment**

Libraries have the most impact when they are recognized as key components of a community, both as a physical location close to schools and major community services, and as part of community development projects. Several examples illustrate this strategic positioning so that programs and services are interwoven with teachers and students in schools; adult education

programs; health, women, family and youth organizations; local government; and farming and small business sectors.

According to the principles of C-E, the initial contribution of the local community starts with the provision of a building for the library which can accommodate 50-80 readers at any one time. The building is expected to meet the minimum standards set by C-E including location, safety, availability to a nearby schools and community services. The community nominates 5 people to serve as Library Management Committee members. The Committee members have the roles of resource mobilization, planning, supervision, advisors and preparing work manuals and procedures. They are represented from the education sector, culture and tourism bureau, students, and women and children affairs offices in the municipality. The community also contributes to the refurbishment of the library building and pays the salaries of the librarians and other staff as well as paying for utilities. These general guidelines for establishing a building and a Library Management Committee play out differently in each community depending on resources, leadership and commitment to the concept of a community library.

As part of a new initiative to build a more cohesive community library system, a scheme has been created to use Lead Librarians (LLs) at six regional bureaus. CODE –Ethiopia uses its cadre of LLs in the specific roles of coordinating, mobilizing, monitoring, evaluating, creating partnerships, training, sensitizing and advocating on behalf of CLs with the close supervision and support rendered by C-E. The LLs are nominated by the Regional Bureau of Education office and selected from the educational and related institutions available in the five regions and from one city council.

5. Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice

Libraries have a fundamental commitment to inclusion and responsiveness to changing social and political values. As expectations for learning and living change, CL must support and encourage changing values by organizing new materials for the collection, building programs that include all people and the operation of a facility that is welcoming and inclusive. 'The core activities of library and information services for culturally and linguistically diverse communities are central, not separate or additional, and should always be designed to meet local or specific needs' (IFLA 2014). Two important examples of how C-E librarians learned to address equity, inclusion and social justice are finding ways within their programs to:
  a. provide girls and women and their children with opportunities for literacy and learning; and
  b. use local language materials to promote reading and support a culture for reading.

As part of the government's recent initiatives, primary education has become a major thrust in Ethiopia. Goals have been set to have all children attend school and to develop literacy throughout the country. Secondary schools have new curriculum and many new community colleges and universities have been established during the past ten years. Woven throughout this 'literacy for all' initiative has been an emphasis on health issues, hygiene, HIV/AIDS education and a general push linking education with economic growth and development for the country. One area of major focus has been the education of girls and women with special initiatives aimed to discourage girls from leaving school.

The CLs in Ethiopia have been playing a key role in promoting the use of libraries by girls. Librarians learned how to set up special times that are set aside for 'girls-only' in the library including arranging appropriate safety and security. Book clubs aimed at girls are being established, and rules and promotions in the CL support girls' interests and needs. Coupled with the general emphasis on education with specific attention to girls and women, has been the push for the inclusion and development of indigenous language materials for teaching and learning. Unique in Africa, primary school children in Ethiopia receive instruction in their birth language until Grade 8 when instruction shifts to English. CODE-Ethiopia has responded to the push for local language materials through its extensive publishing programme. Over 500 titles are published in six local languages and distributed to schools and local CLs. Children enjoy these books a great deal and find comfort in reading novels and information in their birth language.

During the training workshops, librarians' limited knowledge of their local language collection was supported by providing silent reading time for each language group to read and then share and discuss the books amongst themselves. Silent reading is a foundational skill for the promotion of a reading culture, practicing reading and responding to the ideas and stories in social settings. The librarians also learned and practiced the staple pedagogical methods of read alouds, shared reading and choral reading, including how to introduce a book to children, engaging them in fluent and meaningful reading, and guiding their comprehension and interpretation of the book. They applied these strategies to both storybooks and information books. Finally, they learned how to help students understand how to use tools for locating information within local language reference books (table of contents, glossary, index, headings), as well as how to help students use features of these texts to comprehend (bolded words, graphics and illustrations, finding word meaning without going to a dictionary). Using C-E books meant that librarians could support development of important literacy skills for all children and youth in meaningful linguistic contexts.

Image 3: Librarians engaged in silent reading of CODE- Ethiopia books in their own local language

6. Partnerships/Interactions

As an integral part of the community attempting to meet the needs and interests of its members, library staff in CLs must reframe their identity and role from guardians and authorities of resources to that of learners, leaders, promoters and researchers. Who is the community served by the library? What are the needs and interests in the community including individuals, sectors and organizations? Librarians take leadership in building community connections and demonstrate how the library plays a vital role in education and community development. However, they cannot do this alone. They must forge meaningful partnerships and work with their community leaders, municipal and district officials, school principals and teachers, parents and other adults within their communities.

Key targets for building these relationships are local teachers in primary and secondary schools. In many areas of the country, there are split school days where one half of the population attends school in the morning and the other half in the afternoon. This allows students the chance to use the CL in either the morning or the afternoon. The library staff also make connections with teachers showcasing what the CL can do for them and their students.

Librarians have also developed membership campaigns to bring students into the CL. Book clubs have been started where students share their current reading with their peers. Community members are encouraged to learn about the CL with special events like coffee ceremonies and Reading Week celebrations.

Image 4: Women preparing food for the Reading Week celebration, Lera CL, Ethiopia

7. Action/Research

As described above, C-E librarians are taking new actions built on partnerships, equity and ensuring a safe learning environment. This requires interaction with community members to identify questions, topics and problems to be solved, and trying out responses to community needs with materials and programs (Krolack, 2003). Is is also about developing action plans, seeking feedback on the actions taken and revising the action plan in a continuous cycle of reflection, planning, action and back to reflection. Librarians must document their activities, share results with the community and identity new ways to build their library programs, using a cycle as affirmed by other effective African community libraries (Parry, 2009).

One of the key ways librarians can pro-actively build their effectiveness is to hold regular meetings with their Library Management Committee. The job of this Committee is to monitor ongoing progress, address concerns and develop strategies for sustaining and growing the CL. In some cases, the Management Committee starts out strongly, but as personnel change and needs shift, there can be a weakening of its effectiveness. Throughout the training program, C-E librarians learned strategies to keep the Committee active and involved in their work by sharing successes with each other, applying principles learned from workshop leaders to their own contexts and drawing up specific plans to take back to their libraries.

During the training program representatives from Library Management Committees across the country were brought to Addis Ababa to participate in workshops about their roles and to develop strategies for improving their CLs. One of the major themes emerging from the workshops was the need for an organized professional network to continue to support local CLs. The critical issue of networking came to the forefront during an afternoon discussion at the end of the third series of workshops. Led by C-E's Executive Director and Program Manager, the case for networking at zonal, regional and national levels, and the establishment of a community librarians' association was made. A consensus of opinion across the group resulted in appointing the eleven Lead Librarians to serve as organizing committee members. Follow-up activities are now unfolding as this national association takes form.

Throughout this series of workshops, participants learned the importance of identifying a need, developing a strategy to address that need, trying some new activities, evaluating how well things went and then adjusting plans for improved success. They learned to share ideas from colleagues and how to adapt ideas provided in the workshops to the local culture and environments in which they worked. This action model proved empowering to the participants with a growing sense of their emerging professionalism evident in their confidence and excitement about their role and the role of a CL.

A key instrument for the librarians' action research was a set of seven standards aligned with the ecological framework. These standards of library program development were created by the authors of this paper. Standards 1 – 5 were introduced in the first week of training and Standards 6 and 7 during the second training period. Indicators and rubrics structured the action research so that librarians and the training staff could mark progress over the program. Along with completing the tracking sheets for sessions 2 and 3, librarians were responsible for providing evidence of all attempts to address the standards throughout the one and a half year training program. Table 1 below lists the standards by the order in which they were introduced.

Standard	Standard Focus
1.	Participants demonstrate an understanding of the role of the library and the librarian in the community.
2.	Participants create a detailed plan for a reading promotion program.
3.	Participants use CODE-Ethiopia Books effectively in the reading promotion program.
4.	Participants include activities for girls/women and families in the reading promotion program.
5.	Participants monitor and share successes from the reading promotion program.
6.	Participants demonstrate an understanding of how the librarian works with the school and with students and teachers for reading promotion and literacy support.
7.	Participants complete a variety of literacy activities in the community library.

Table 1: Seven standards for community library programs

It was found that almost all the libraries had completed activities that demonstrated their understanding of the role of the library within their community (standard 1). They produced detailed yearly plans (standard 2) and took pictures that showcased the use of CODE-Ethiopia local language books (standard 3). In a variety of ways, they displayed how they designed separate programs for girls, women and families (standard 4). Multiple types of data also provided evidence of the increase in reading promotion activities (standard 5) completed since the last set of workshops. By the end of the training program, most of the libraries had started connections with schools and other organizations in their respective locality (standard 6). Finally, all librarians provided evidence of activities done in relation to adult and child literacy programs (standard 7) (Alemu, 2013a, 2013b).

8. Discussion, challenges and moving forward

By designing library programs based on an ecological model of community libraries and by applying a comprehensive set of standards, CODE-Ethiopia CLs have tools that facilitate the development of meaningful and effective local libraries. Training programs can also be beneficial when developed and delivered with such tools as a foundation. Embracing Krolak's (2012), Mostert's (1998) and Stillwill's (1989) vision of community libraries in underserved areas, and taking up the challenge to pro-actively reach out to the community (Krolack, 2012, p. 22), CE librarians have learned how to:

a. support adults including women and their children through the use of meaningful purposes and local language materials; and

b. build connections with schools, health organizations, women and community-based organizations (CBOs), government, faith- based organizations (FBOs) and other community groups to support both Ethiopian and global literacy goals.

These libraries and their innovative programs, in turn support nation-wide reading promotion projects in which children and young people from every corner of the country can gain access to reading and curriculum-support learning materials. These community libraries are also instrumental in developing post-literacy initiatives that protect the relapse of adults into illiteracy.

The programmes described in this paper are encumbered by many challenges, including access to meaningful resources and the perilously low literacy rates in the rural areas where C-E libraries are established. There continues to be what some Ethiopian leaders suggest is a *book famine* in these CLs, but the library staff and their regional library leaders recognize the value and purpose of a CL. They recognize how their CL is a unique and vital part of their community and they know how it can contribute to personal and community development for male and female adults and all children and youth. They also know they must harness the skills and resources of all community partners to build and develop their library and how they must react to community needs and build library programs that meet those needs. Valuable resources such as UNESCO's *Creating and Sustaining Literate Environments* (2011) provide beginning guidance, but must be adapted to local cultures, practices, and resource availability. As discussed earlier, the pressing need for local language materials is not only concurrent with mother tongue education policy, but also with the strong valuing of indigenous Ethiopian cultures threatened by the large number of donated English books (Parry, 2011).

CODE-Ethiopia has moved beyond establishing more libraries and teaching people to manage them. They recognize that a CL must develop a community-based, outreach program that targets the whole community and that such a library program can be developed even with a limited number of books and other resources. C-E's strong publication program of local language materials for young children's reading pleasure and for curriculum support for young people is critical to meaningful literacy development and learning. Librarians learned how to effectively use these resources beyond just having them available for independent use. However, the demand far surpasses supply. Production and provision of digital local language, local content materials promises one avenue of meeting the access challenge – but with these inevitable advances will be complications with such 21st century expectations in infrastructure and technology access and quality.

In order to start to meet the challenges of establishing digital library programs, C-E has a new project funded through EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) in which CLs will be supplied with computers and data projectors in order to showcase digital books for preschool children and their families.[1] The plan is to create six digital books, have them translated into local languages and make them accessible through the computers provided. The focus of the books will be information texts with content drawn from local experiences, cultures and

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[1] CODE Ethiopia's pre-school literacy project was one of 10 public and community library projects from Africa, Europe and Latin America awarded grants in 2014 to develop services that use information and communication technology to serve the needs of children and youth: http://www.eifl.net/news/ten-new-library-services-children-and-youth

everyday family life. In addition, the target group for the project is families with young children with the main emphasis on supporting early reading habits and skills. The location for the project will be in local community libraries. The library staff will be provided with specialized training in using the technologies as well as strategies for supporting families and early literacy. A set of early literacy activities will be developed that library staff will deliver to parents and children in their communities. The activities will include reading aloud of the digital books, a shared reading time where everyone can join in the reading as well as time to discuss ideas generated from the content of the books. As the session draws to a close, library staff will give the children a print copy of the book so they can read at home. Follow-up sessions will include re-reading the book from the previous session and the introduction of a new book. It is hoped families will return and take part in all sessions.

A unique feature of this project is that in each CL participants will be invited to create two digital books that reflect their interests and their communities. These in turn will be included in the beginning collection of 12 digital books to be made available to all C-E community libraries throughout the country. This EIFL project will involve partnerships with local Ethiopian writers and illustrators, technology training through the Ministry of Education, the establishment of a project team that includes CODE-Ethiopia staff, government representatives, teachers, librarians and international consultants.

As noted in the background part of this paper, the Ethiopian government is in the midst of comprehensive initiatives to improve literacy levels in the early grades and for adults. Libraries play a key role in this effort. Librarians need to advance their own literacy and be educated about literacy development and education. This is the only way they can effectively use such strategies as silent reading, read aloud, shared reading, and ways of supporting information literacy and comprehension. Librarians also need to keep current with the various programs in the country. Partnerships with all organizations involved in literacy improvement endeavours consisting of ongoing conversations and the provision of informed library programmes, are the only way to maximize the role of the library in literacy improvement. These are all overwhelming challenges for those in remote rural communities, thus underscoring the essential role of Library Leaders in each region, as well as the formation of a national library association to take responsibility for conveying national initiatives to community librarians and their networks, and supporting meaningful ways they can contribute in their own communities.

9. Conclusion

The ecological framework for community library programs is embedded in the envisioned role of community libraries as agents of individual and social/economic change (Asselin & Doiron, 2013; IFLA, 2014; Namhila & Niskala 2013; Stillwell, 2003). This is not a singular role of the library in any community, but as discussed above, is fully dependent on being an integral player in the local and larger country's communities (Williment, 2009). This is a complex and sophisticated undertaking which needs to be conceived, implemented and celebrated as a collective which includes the individual librarian, the regional network and the national body. Even then, effects will be uneven, because contexts and the extent to which social and economic change is overtly and covertly valued will vary.

Again, recognizing the factor of context, a country with a long and deeply held history and culture such as Ethiopia needs to find its own way to the future. Attitudes, customs and longstanding social and cultural institutions will endure alongside even the boldest reforms. No single training program and no one library program will be a one-size-fits-all, even within a country. Using the ecological framework approach permits a progressive re-visioning of the role of community libraries and how they can contribute to broader social and economic change, while allowing for flexibility and respect for their unique contexts, different access to the quantity and quality of resources, and the factors affecting the commitment of their community organizations to establishing partnerships and to change. Developing librarians as lifelong learners and action researchers within their own communities allows them to meaningfully assess and improve how they support the literacy and learning of their families and neighbours.

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