Foreword

A quiet revolution is happening in rural Africa where an unmet demand and hunger for information is being met by communities and individuals who are establishing community libraries. These libraries are spreading like wildfire in various parts of the continent. Usually small, under-resourced, and in many cases managed by a volunteer, they are making an unprecedented impact on the lives of the local populations. It is very refreshing to see a new model of public libraries specifically geared towards serving the disadvantaged and underserved population, while operating on quite limited budgets.

Libraries for the public and that are managed by public funds are mostly to be found in urban areas. The rationale for this is that with the limited available resources they have to be located in areas where there are large concentrations of people and therefore where more people are likely to use them. This unfortunately leaves out the majority of the population, about 85%, because they live in rural areas.

In addition, the training of librarians for Africa is based on the Western model. In the 1960s and early 70s, most African librarians received their training in the European or American library schools. While it was sound library training, it did not train librarians for the African situation. In the 1970s and 1980s, various African universities started opening up library schools. They were, however, also based on the Western model. African library leaders in the 1980s and 1990s started talking about the need to produce a “barefoot librarian” – a metaphor for a library worker who would be more in touch with the many children and in some cases adults who walked the African countryside barefooted and who needed a place and service that could help them boost their literacy, reading, and learning skills, as well as assist them in gaining access to development information. Such a librarian would strive to know the information needs of the population and would therefore intimately fit in the environment in which he/she worked. While some library schools tried to emphasize the need to give that kind of training, they were soon overtaken by the need to be part of the new technology revolution. Emphasis is increasingly being put on using ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) as enablers for development, and library schools are embracing the idea of ensuring that their students graduate with skills in using ICTs. National governments have also put the use of ICTs on their priority lists and have established Ministries of ICTs. National governments are putting computers in classrooms, in offices, and in telecentres, among others. The importance of fusing new technologies into the services provided cannot be overemphasized. However, in many cases the emphasis has been put on the technology rather than the outcome. In this case, the outcome is a service that goes back to the basics of ensuring that information in all formats—including new technologies—is provided and used for the development of both the individual and the society.
The Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda and the rural libraries in Burkina Faso and Ghana where the authors of this book carried out the research on which this book is based, as well as the many community libraries that are springing up in various parts of the continent, are what Africans have been looking for, for a long time. The myth that Africans do not read has been shattered as people in rural areas have rediscovered libraries, and they are developing many new ways in which they can use libraries to improve their lives. The women reading with their children and the improved literacy and reading levels in these rural communities are all heart-warming outcomes of this “revolution.” This book, which is based on research carried out on the ground and on interactions with people who actually use these libraries, delves not only into reading habits and literacy skills, but looks at how a simple village library can be at the centre of development in the life of a rural African dweller. It holistically looks at issues of libraries and development. The research carried out dispels the idea that libraries are alien to Africa. Instead, it shows that Africans can adapt ideas from outside their immediate frame of reference and put them to excellent use, thus deriving maximum benefit from them. It also consolidates the idea that libraries are for everyone in the community. This book comes at a time when there is renewed energy worldwide, but especially in the developing world, to put libraries on the development agenda. There is a need to think deeply about training for and provision of library services for the public in Africa. This book provides an excellent look at the real life challenges and opportunities for library trainers, librarians, and policy makers.

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Gertrude Kayaga Mulindwa has been working with the National Library of Uganda since 2004. Besides heading the National Library as a heritage institution, she also oversees the development of public libraries in the country, ensuring that local governments effectively provide public library services to their communities. Gertrude previously worked as University Librarian at the Uganda Martyrs University and as the Director of Botswana National Library Services. She is very passionate about getting children and the youth to develop a reading culture and to become lifelong learners through use of library services. She is a founder member of the Uganda Community Libraries Association, which brings together community initiated library services. She holds a BA from Makerere University, Uganda, and a Masters Degree in Librarianship from University of Wales in the UK.