Chapter 13

A Framework for Advocacy, Outreach and Public Programming in Public Libraries in Africa

Kgomotso H. Moahi
University of Botswana, Botswana

ABSTRACT

Public libraries are regarded as partners in the development process in Africa, yet they bemoan the fact that they are not adequately supported both by their principals in terms of resources and recognition, and by their users in terms of usage levels that justify their existence. This chapter presents a review of literature on the advocacy, outreach and public programming carried out in public libraries. The thesis advanced is that it is through these processes that public libraries can engender the support they require. However, advocacy and public programming can only be effectively carried out where libraries have reached out to communities to provide relevant services that are informed by their context and needs. The themes arising from the review suggest a framework for public libraries that includes five areas, namely, strategy and leadership, partnership and collaboration, community engagement and involvement, assessment and reporting, and equity and social inclusiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Libraries in general are challenged to demonstrate the “value” they add in their operational environment (Town, 2017). Often, that value is articulated as what libraries do and what they are to communities, what Orr (1973) quoted by Town (2017) terms the goodness of the library versus the good it does. In order for libraries to ensure their sustainability they need to be able to “measure post utilization beneficial effects” (Town, 2017, p. 27), and share the value by repackaging the resultant data and telling stories to appropriate audiences (Tolson et al., 2014). Such data and stories can be useful in outreach and advocacy activities for sustainability. Hoq (2015) breaks down the types of sustainability required by public

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libraries to include: economic; political and institutional; social and cultural; and technological. Public libraries must therefore use outreach, programming and advocacy to achieve the required funding, and partner with various stakeholders to ensure relevance.

Public libraries in Africa are particularly challenged to make a case for their value as development partners that should be resourced accordingly. For the most part, they are viewed as elitist and relevant to those with a certain amount of literacy (Lor, 2000; Ocholla, 2006; Davis, 2009; Opara, 2006). One of the ways for libraries and librarians to make themselves visible and relevant is through advocacy, outreach, and appropriate programming. This chapter presents a review of the literature on advocacy, outreach, and programming in public libraries with the aim of arriving at a framework for advocacy, outreach and public programming for public libraries in Africa. The review is driven by the following research questions:

1. What are the definitional perspectives, distinctive characteristic types and challenges of advocacy, outreach and public programming in public libraries in Africa?
2. How has research informed the processes and practice of advocacy, outreach and public programming?
3. What are some of the initiatives and methods employed in advocacy, outreach and public programming in Africa?
4. Can a framework emerge for use in the African context?

BACKGROUND

Public libraries are critical contributors to development (IFLA, 2013). They are expected to provide context-specific services, contribute to equity and social justice, forge partnerships and interactions towards fulfilling their mandate, and engage in research on their operations and services (Stranger-Johannessen et al., 2014). All these activities are to ensure that their programs and services are relevant to the communities they serve. UNESCO Public Library Manifesto articulates the role of public libraries as being, “...the local gateway to knowledge, providing a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups...” The Manifesto proclaims UNESCO’s belief in the public library “...as a living force for education, culture and information, as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women...” (IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, 1994). Thus, public libraries are viewed as symbols of social change and inclusion (Davis, 2009).

Public libraries in Africa trace their origins to colonial times when they were established for the benefit of colonial officers and their families, and by extension, a small group of literate locals. After independence, libraries were recognized as partners in achieving political and intellectual freedom by nationalist governments, and were prioritized along with health and education (Opara, 2006; Mchombu & Beukes-Amiss, 2015). However, by the 1980s, when the economies of many African countries began to flounder, the prioritization ceased, resulting in many problems. These problems have persisted and include their questioned relevance; outdated models of library service delivery; and their sustainability (Hoq, 2015). It is argued that public libraries in Africa must shed their elitist approach and provide communities with relevant services (Davis, 2009; Isaak, 2002; Okily, 2003; Kama, 2016). Addressing these issues requires a re-thinking of the roles of the public library to assert and insinuate themselves into the fabric of the lives of the people they are meant to serve, including policy makers. The consensus