Chapter 7
Beyond Reading: Impacts on Local Economic Development

ABSTRACT
How might rural village libraries impact local economic development? This question has not been studied in depth, but there is some anecdotal evidence from some of the rural libraries presented in this book that access to these libraries may provide an indirect way for users to discover the link between access to information and improvement in their way of life. Sometimes, this improvement may manifest itself as an improvement in economic status, no matter how slight. Other times, access to the library might result in improved literacy skills that in the long run may allow users to engage in income-generating activities where reading or being able to write is necessary. The libraries themselves may also create local economic development programs that generate income that is then put back into the community and the library.

INTRODUCTION
So far, this book has presented an overview of research and initiatives related to the rural village library in Africa. Rural village libraries in developing areas of the world have great potential. They are gathering places, places to learn, and places to interact with others. They provide reading materials and access to different types of information. On a smaller scale, these libraries may also impact local economic development, which can mean a lot in rural areas where opportunity for economic growth is minimal. This chapter presents a cursory overview of economic development in rural areas in general, and contextualizes some real-life examples of small-scale economic development projects from some rural village libraries in Africa. The Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda is highlighted in this chapter.

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AFRICA

Economists, educators and researchers have all expressed concern about depressed economic development in rural parts of Africa. Strategies for improving economic development have been advanced by many, and while some developing nations in Africa have benefited from these efforts, many have not. There are still vast areas where economic development is stagnant, with little or no opportunity for revitalization. Financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have participated in debt relief for the continent, along with various governments, large corporate donors, and non-profits (Wordofa, 2004). Unfortunately, much of Africa remains untouched by these global efforts, and chronic poverty continues from one generation to the next.

Many reasons have been suggested for the poor rate of economic development that plagues most of the continent. For instance, Okpala and Jonsson (2002) suggest that “the lack of sustainable economic growth and development in Africa are partly due to political, social and economic instability” (p. 87). They go on to say that acts of corruption are a major factor, and “are quite pervasive in most African countries” (p.87). The authors further found that Uganda has the highest economic instability estimate of any African country, which means that it is more likely than other countries to experience economic unrest and lack of economic progress.

How is economic development defined in this context, and more specifically, with respect to Uganda? Jagnayak (1997) presents two definitions of economic development from Rogers and Shoemaker, and Okun and Richardson. Rogers and Shoemaker define economic development as “a type of social change in which new ideas are introduced into a social system in order to produce higher per capita incomes and levels of living through more modern production methods and improved social organization” (Jagnayak, 1997, p. 5). Okun and Richardson state “economic development is a sustained secular improvement in material well being which may consider to be reflected in an increasing flow of goods and services” (Jagnayak, 1997, p. 14). Ollawa (1977) speaks more narrowly about rural development: “Rural development involves any clear and consciously applied strategy designed to restructure the economy in order to satisfy the material needs and aspirations of the rural masses” (p. 402).

Abdul Muyeed describes nine indicators for rural development in his 1982 article, “Some reflections on education for rural development” (p.231). Muyeed’s indicators highlight the importance not only of income generation, but also of employment, increased access to education and better healthcare. Muyeed’s indicators of rural development are:

1. The rate of increase in income gained by the rural poor.
2. The rate of increase in productivity of the small-scale farms.
3. The degree of increased participation in decentralized administration and planning.
4. The rate of improvement in nutritional status among the rural poor.
5. The rate of increase in availability of employment.
6. The rate of increase in the acquisition of functional literacy.
7. The proportion of increase in the budget allocation to education at all levels.
8. The degree of social demand for education services in the rural areas.
9. The rate of improvement in the availability of social, health, recreational and other services to the rural poor.