

# The Role of Libraries in the Creation of Literate Environments

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## **I. Introduction**

All over the world libraries are dedicated to providing free and equitable access to information for all, be it in written, electronic or audiovisual form. They play a key role in creating literate environments and promoting literacy by offering relevant and attractive reading material for all ages and all literacy levels and by offering adult and family literacy classes. They embrace the social responsibility to offer services that bridge social, political and economic barriers, and traditionally make a special effort to extend their services to marginalized people. Libraries assist in finding, using and interpreting appropriate information that opens up opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, informed citizenship, recreation, creative imagination, individual research, critical thinking, and ultimately, empowerment in an increasingly complex world.

This paper will show how library and information services in public and school libraries, in community learning centres or NGO resource centres are dedicated to creating literate environments that support basic education for all. It will not discuss the rather different role of academic research libraries and specialised documentation centres.

## **II. The Creation of Literate Environments**

Dynamic and stimulating literate environments at home, in the classroom, in the workplace and in the community are essential to literacy acquisition, development and lifelong use. In many countries, people cannot imagine daily life without written information. They start the day reading the newspaper, they pass many posters and advertisements on the way to work or while running errands, they read and write e-mails and reports at work, they look through the daily mail and enjoy an interesting magazine or a good book in the evening. But in many countries of the developing world there is a serious lack of reading materials and hence a lack of reading culture. UNESCO states that *"the goal of Education for All also involves the development of literate societies in the developing world, and cannot be attained solely by providing quality learning materials to schools. If people are to stay literate, they must have access to a wide variety of written materials and continue the habit of reading in their adult lives"* (UNESCO: Basic).

If literacy is not placed within a functional framework of relevance and if newly acquired literacy skills are not constantly used and improved, there is a real danger that those who have acquired literacy skills will relapse into illiteracy and the huge investment in school education and adult literacy classes will be wasted. In India, *"Most of the ongoing literacy programmes do not provide long-term support to neo-literates. Unless they are provided effective support through reading and learning materials, they may again fall in the category of illiterates. Here libraries play a vital role by providing reading and learning materials to them"* (Singh, 2003: viii). Some of the requirements and challenges for creating a literate environment will be discussed in the following sub-chapters on oral societies, the local publishing industry, the home environment, and the school environment.

### ***Oral Societies***

Books and libraries are often seen as redundant in societies that are mainly based on oral traditions and practices. In such societies, people stop reading once formal education is completed as *"they derive more pleasure from the oral and performing arts – talking, singing,*

*dancing, socializing – than from the rather private and individual reading of a book. Since the majority are illiterate, they affect the minority who can read, with the result that the oral mode remains prevalent" (Tötemeyer, 1994: 413).*

The way forward is to develop basic reading materials that support literacy based on local knowledge and are therefore attractive to neo-literates. Such material facilitates the transition from an oral culture to a literate and culturally enhanced environment. If students and neo-literates do not learn to associate their spoken home language with books and reading, they will most likely see the very act of reading as a foreign activity. UNESCO has been working on educational materials for Asian and Pacific countries that combine many formats and traditions and that strengthen and enrich these cultures by extending the speaking, listening, reading, and writing functions of language (Knuth, 1998).

### ***Local Publishing Industry***

In order to express and record local culture, knowledge and research and to translate relevant material into indigenous languages, it is important to have a strong local publishing industry. Unfortunately, in many countries the complex book chain, linking author to reader, via publishers, booksellers and librarians, is often small and struggling. The situation is particularly complicated in countries that have several local languages, especially if it is government policy that pupils should be taught in their mother tongue for the first few years of primary schooling.

Africa produces a mere 2% of the world's books, despite having 12% of the world's population. It is estimated that sub-Saharan Africa imports close to 70% of its books. The majority are university textbooks and vocational training books and cost an average of US\$25 per copy (Makotsi, 2004: 4). In countries where people struggle for daily survival, it is beyond their purchasing power to afford reading materials. One practical solution and useful tool for promoting literate communities, despite a lack of local publishing capacity, are local newspapers in indigenous languages. These can be produced by libraries, NGOs or community centres. An example of this is provided by CODE-Ethiopia, a local NGO, which operates a programme of local newspaper generation in conjunction with their network of 62 community libraries in the north and west of Ethiopia.

### ***Home Environment***

The most important factor in a child's acquisition of literacy are the reading practices of the parents. This has been shown in numerous studies, including the 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which showed that, in the case of Sweden, the amount of books and reading material in a family was the deciding factor influencing the reading scores of pupils (Stiftung Lesen, 2004: 56). Similarly, a study of the German Foundation Stiftung Lesen on "Reading Behaviour in Germany in the new Century" revealed that the positive attitude of parents and the availability of reading materials at home are the most important factors in creating positive lifelong reading motivation in children. Children have different reading needs at different stages of their lives, but they need access to enjoyable reading materials from the very beginning. Parents have to be encouraged to read to their children while they are small, sing with them and play creative language games with them as part of their everyday life. Furthermore, parents have to be a good example by being active readers themselves. Children who grow up in a literate home environment are at an advantage when entering school and are more likely to be successful throughout formal

schooling than their peers from non- or semi-literate home environments (Stiftung Lesen, 2004: 30). The desire to support the literacy acquisition of their children is a strong motivation for illiterate adults to become literate and this should be seen as a perfect opportunity to reach them through family literacy programs.

The government of the United Kingdom has recognised the key role that books can play in giving children a head start in education. It therefore recently initiated "Bookstart", a scheme whereby every 9-month-old baby receives free books when visiting a health service. The scheme is currently being extended to provide packs of books up to the age of three. *"Giving children a free book or two may seem a modest endeavour but it has produced extraordinary results. Children in the pilot scheme outperformed their peers in their baseline assessments, and later in the Key Stage 1 SATs. If books can have such an impact on educational attainment in the UK, where information is so plentiful, the impact is likely to be greater in sub-Saharan Africa, where learning resources are so scarce"* (Makotsi, 2004: 5).

Libraries play an important role in providing a wide range of reading materials free of charge to parents who cannot afford to constantly buy new material. Positive examples are libraries that are not waiting for parents and educators to use their services, but that are reaching out to them by co-operating with community organisations and initiatives, such as health centres, churches, kindergartens and schools.

### ***School Environment and Teachers***

Teachers should encourage reading for pleasure and as a prerequisite for continuing education. Unfortunately, many children learn only the technique of reading at school and often do not experience anything more challenging than textbook-based learning and textbook-based teaching. They are able to read aloud, but are effectively incapable of learning autonomously from written text. A vicious educational cycle continues if teachers are not strongly committed to providing supplementary reading materials and are not trained how to use them for the benefit of the students.

The World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 identified that *"in many schools that are trying to meet government targets for Universal Primary Education, there is an acute lack of textbooks, let alone supplementary reading materials. It is common for one textbook to be shared between six or more pupils, and often there are no textbooks at all"* (Makotsi, 2004: 6). Therefore, the challenge for many schools is to create a literate environment when funding is scarce.

Obviously, it is better to have a single set of books in a classroom than to have no reading material at all. But in order to develop a reading habit in students, they must be given access to a wide range of attractive and relevant materials. These need to be exchanged from time to time to keep the interest of students and to meet their study needs. Alternative models of providing access to library-based resources have been developed in recent years by schools that do not have the resources to equip a traditional school library and to train and pay for a school librarian. Library models that provide rotating boxes of books and reading materials and that train teachers in basic library skills are very popular. These models are organised mainly by the local or national library service, by government departments or by national or international NGOs.<sup>1</sup>

School libraries provide access to supplementary materials that complement and enhance the learning provided by prescribed textbooks. As education involves not merely memorizing information but the ability to learn independently throughout life, students need to learn how

to do research on their own and to explore a subject beyond the information that is given in class. Teachers can encourage these critical literacy skills by introducing students to the library and by teaching them information retrieval skills. Unfortunately, a UNESCO/ADEA survey for the 2000 Education for All assessment revealed that *“As the decade came to a close, school libraries were said to have the lowest of priorities in educational spending. The majority of schools possessed no library. Where some semblance of a school library did exist, it was often no more than a few shelves of outdated and worn-out material, inadequately staffed”* (Montagnes, 2001: 27).<sup>2</sup>

Rosenberg provides a detailed comparison of different school-based library models in Africa and compares their advantages, disadvantages and costs (Rosenberg, 2003). The classroom libraries run by the READ Educational Trust in South Africa are considered to be an excellent alternative to a cost-intensive school library for establishing a literate environment in the school.

### **III. Impact of Providing Access to Books**

The positive impact of books and access to secondary reading materials on reading achievement, creativity, developing language skills and sustaining literacy has been widely acknowledged. But it is difficult to find concrete impact statistics among the academic literature as the positive examples of successful reading programmes or library provisions have to be mirrored by control students or communities that do not have access to the same reading programmes or library services.

One impact study comes from the READ Educational Trust in South Africa, where children in classes with classroom libraries *“outperformed control school counterparts by as much as 189 per cent, and were ahead by 18 months in reading scores and two years in writing scores”* (Montagnes, 2001: 28).

“Book floods” are used as a strategy in Fiji, Singapore and Sri Lanka to increase the amount of reading materials available. Students are immersed in high-interest books designed to be read, discussed and shared in various ways. Evidence shows that book floods bring dramatic improvements in reading, writing, listening, vocabulary and grammar, especially for younger age groups and where children are learning in a language different from their home language. A pilot project in Sri Lanka provided between 100 and 200 books per school for years 4 and 5. Those in the project schools gained three times as much in reading as those in the control schools, together with parallel improvements in writing and listening comprehension. Positive changes were also noticed in pupils’ attitudes towards reading as a valuable resource for learning.<sup>3</sup>

In the Nueva Escuela of Colombia and the Nueva Escuela Unitaria of Guatemala, textbooks have been replaced by self-instructional study guides and supplemented with a wide choice of additional reading and reference materials. Results of the project show that students from these schools score highly in most cognitive and non-cognitive tests.

The importance of books and libraries for educational achievement is not questioned in highly literate societies. In these societies the greater challenge is to motivate children and adults to read for self-study and pleasure when competing against television, computer games, etc. A successful project by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Germany addressed this challenge and raised library use and reading motivation among students who are reluctant readers.<sup>4</sup> Such

projects are important in Germany as the PISA study demonstrated. This study, comparing student achievement in various OECD countries, showed that 21% of young adults in Germany have a low literacy level. Of these 50% are immigrants. 42% of German students who took part in the PISA study said that they do not read for fun. In this context it is interesting to note that just 20% of Germans regularly use a public library. By comparison, in Finland, which came out top of the PISA study, 80% of the population use public libraries regularly, on average once a month by borrowing 20 items per year. Sociological research showed that Finnish schools and libraries tend to balance out social differences, whereas Germany has the strongest correlation between social background and educational achievement (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2004: 88).

#### **IV. The Role of Libraries in Society**

Having a comprehensive, country-wide network of libraries in literate societies is a relatively recent phenomenon dating from the late nineteenth century. Historically, public libraries have a strong tradition in Anglo-American societies. The United Kingdom passed the first library law in 1850. Libraries were first introduced in the North-American colonies with the aim of educating the settlers in the new world. Early discussion clubs, modelling themselves on English benevolent societies, developed small book collections for their members' use. Religious denominations also contributed to public education and supported the emergence of free public libraries. As early as the 1890s, the public library in the United States responded to the language and literacy needs of a large influx of immigrants, providing English and citizenship classes in many urban libraries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, libraries were part of an awakening consciousness that saw education as an instrument for social change. After World War II, mainstream libraries gradually started to extend their services to community groups and, by the 1960s, a special focus was set on reaching marginalized groups. In the following years, libraries played an important role in national literacy campaigns, for example in Thailand. In the 1980s, more flexible and proactive facilities, often called resource centres, began to emerge as a force in movements for social change and the democratic reconstruction of civil society. These centres began to explore new relationships with their users, valuing local culture, supporting community development, and preserving indigenous knowledge (Adams, 2002: 33-34).

Today the role of libraries and professional librarians is changing worldwide. They are no longer passive keepers and preservers of books; rather, they have evolved to become facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities with an emphasis on service, identifying user needs and communicating solutions. Modern libraries are unfolding the community's learning potential by providing information on community issues, such as health, employment, continuing education and local history.<sup>5</sup> This equitable access to information is essential to enable educated and informed citizens to participate in a democratic global community.<sup>6</sup>

Libraries are also custodians of the local and national culture by storing popular and academic knowledge and material for current and future generations. Public libraries play the most important role worldwide in helping to bridge the information gap by providing free access to information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet. They are inclusive in that they build bridges between individuals at the local level and the global level of knowledge. In industrialised countries, access to modern information technology is currently one of the most attractive library services. For example, in the United Kingdom, public

libraries secured government funding in the middle of the 1990s for computers in every library as part of the "People's Network Project" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2004: 24), a project that assures that no one needs to be excluded from the information revolution. Compared to providing access to ICTs and the Internet in other public spaces such as post offices, libraries have the educational role of assisting users in finding information online.

A best practice study of the German Bertelsmann Stiftung (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2004) showed that the library systems in the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, United States of America and Singapore are modern examples of highly developed library systems. They share a common trait – they have established themselves as an integral part of a national education and information strategy based on library laws and appropriate funding. They offer free access to information, are highly service-oriented, and constantly improve their services through co-operation and networking. These are hybrid libraries that offer traditional media and have a strong focus on providing access to online information. As a result they are used and highly appreciated by 75–90% of the population.

Libraries, increasingly in co-operation with other community organisations, offer a varying amount of activities including author readings, creative writing classes, introductions to information and communication technologies and the Internet, reading groups, exhibitions, summer reading programs, study support, discussion groups and art classes such as drama, poetry and song. The list is endless and activities over the decades show the flexibility of library services to address the needs of the community. The following sub-chapter focuses on one concrete library programme that supports adult literacy achievement.

### ***Library-based Adult Literacy Programmes***

During the 1960s, the challenge of adult illiteracy became apparent. This challenge was addressed during the 1970s and 1980s by various, often nationally-organised, literacy campaigns. At the same time libraries began to focus on extending their services to marginalized people, particularly through literacy programmes. In the United States, public libraries were offering literacy services dating back to 1963. A planning manual for the American Library Association examined the public library's role in national literacy activities in the 1980s. The study found that public libraries report the greatest involvement in all three literacy roles – collections, instruction, and support services. Over 25% of libraries provided direct literacy instruction and in many of these libraries the programmes had become a part of their traditional public library services. Nearly 50% of the libraries reported involvement in literacy coalitions (Fitzgibbons, 2000). In Victoria, Australia, adult literacy programmes began with a pilot programme at the Council of Adult Education in 1972. By 1982, 10% of the Victoria public library service co-operated in the provision of adult literacy classes and by 1991, this had risen to 25% with another 10% providing support for adult literacy programmes in other ways (Campbell, 1991: 5).

For various reasons, libraries are the perfect place to provide adult literacy classes. They have ideally easy access to all the resources needed to run an adult literacy programme, including printed and audio books, magazines for all reading levels, videos and newspapers. Most of them can provide space for students and tutors. They are usually centrally located and accessible by public transport. Libraries are friendly and hospitable places, ideally with service oriented opening hours and approachable staff. Adults with low literacy levels often have bad memories of schools and a negative attitude towards formal education. They can be

invited to the library to enjoy non-reading activities, such as lectures, movies or discussion groups to facilitate their first step back into learning.

Apart from teaching literacy, the library has to focus its collection development on the needs of its neo-literate users. This means a strong focus is needed on the acquisition of relevant and interesting reading material for adults with low vocabulary or literacy skills. If this material is for whatever reasons not available, the library can develop its own community newspaper, ask the course participants to write their own biography or publish a collection of student writings. These are valuable educational tools which encourage students to write, give them an audience for their products, enable them to gain confidence in their writing abilities and encourage organisational skills.

The library can also help to overcome the problem of gender differences in reading acquisition by maintaining collections of materials that appeal to males and females. Many language classes at school and many adult literacy classes focus on fiction texts, which tend to be less appealing to boys and young men. By providing interesting reading material in the areas of sports, science, politics or Do-It-Yourself manuals, the library can counteract the problem that a large percentage of males are perceived to be slow or non-readers.

In Botswana, Village Reading Rooms were established to support and extend library services to literacy graduates in rural areas. As they were mainly established in primary schools, they are today mostly used by pupils and teachers. Nevertheless, they provide a useful and cost effective means of giving access to educational materials in areas where no traditional library service operates.<sup>7</sup>

A strong focus of the last decade has been on using libraries to break the cycle of family illiteracy. The library is a perfect place to offer family literacy programmes as it provides materials and services to all age groups and reading levels. By using the library with their children, parents are setting a good example and help to establish a motivation for reading and a pattern for lifelong learning. In Slovenia, public libraries were among the first providers of intergenerational lifelong learning processes that included children, youth and adults who came together and learned from each other by exchanging knowledge, experiences and viewpoints (Adams, 2002: 30).

The personnel for literacy classes in libraries will come mainly from two sources: the library staff (existing or additional) and volunteers. In order to provide long-term quality service, training and constant development of tutors is crucial. Several countries and organisations have worked on guidelines, some for establishing literacy programmes in libraries, especially public libraries, others for specific types of programmes, such as family literacy programmes, and some for developing training guidelines for library workers. The most comprehensive set of guidelines to date appears to be the *Guidelines for Public Libraries Promoting Literacy*, developed by UNESCO in 1993 under contract from the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and under the direction of Barbro Thomas (Fitzgibbons, 2000).

## **V. Problems and Challenges of Libraries**

The situation of libraries differs enormously worldwide. Some countries and regions, such as the United Kingdom, have well-supported library systems, where a well-established library network extends to every community. In stark contrast are countries such as Kenya with only

36 public libraries, Namibia with 48 and Zambia with 22 public libraries (Rosenberg, 2000: 7). These libraries were set up under unfavourable conditions, and, as Rosenberg offers in a bleak description of the life cycle of a typical rural African library, their future is often not secured: *“Originating from the initiative of a group from the community or an aid agency, their birth is followed by a year or two of rapid growth and a good deal of local publicity and attention. This is followed by a period of slow decline, accompanied by theft, the departure of the initiators, loss of interest among staff and users – the library still exists but signs of life are barely discernible. Sometimes this period continues indefinitely, but often a final stage is reached when all remaining books are removed, stolen, or damaged beyond repair and the premises and staff are allocated to another activity”* (Rosenberg quoted by Mostert, 2001). This description highlights some of the problems and challenges that too often result in a public perception that libraries are not as attractive as they could and should be. The following is a list of the major problems and challenges in the creation, organisation, maintenance and use of libraries. These include lack of funds, lack of professional staff, irrelevant material, colonial mode of librarianship, lack of appropriate training opportunities, lack of needs analysis, ICT challenges, inappropriate buildings and the lack of co-operation and a national information policy.

### ***Lack of Funds***

Libraries have to be appropriately funded if they are to be effective and attractive. But many libraries worldwide are under-funded. For instance, in 2003 Malawi's National Library Service received no funding to buy books for the more than 1,000 library centres that it services (Book Aid International, 2004). The same is true for Bolivia, where public and school libraries receive no funding from their government to buy books. Only widespread protests by the public, including a hunger strike of employees, could prevent the closure of several libraries in 1999 (Döllgast, 2001). By comparison, Finland spends 1% of its total budget on libraries, which is 4.4% of the cultural and educational budget (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2004: 82) and Singapore spends 3% of the educational budget on libraries (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2004: 67). The most crucial resource of a library is its staff and successful libraries spend more than half of their funding on this (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2004: 67). But adequate funding is also needed for the building, for acquiring relevant materials, library furniture, for continuing education, for computers with Internet access and for running costs. Concrete support and guidelines for establishing a basic library service can be obtained from the national or regional library or from international donation and support agencies.

### ***Lack of Professional Staff***

Many libraries in poorer countries are run by non-professional staff. It is assumed that any volunteer or teacher can manage a library. But the quality of a library service depends on the professional quality of its staff, and this in turn depends on the quality and relevance of the training that they have received. Running a library with unprofessional staff is like teaching without professional background: *“Usually, when a decision to establish a library is made, a general hand or some other junior clerk is promoted to become the librarian. Because of the librarian's lack of professional training on how to handle information, the library fails to make a recognizable impact”* (Kunaka, 1998). Obviously, there are talented people and a lay librarian with passion and the commitment to serve his or her community is more beneficial than an introverted keeper of books or having no librarian at all. But running a successful library is a complex management task. Another aspect of the problem is the low pay of librarians and the lack of training opportunities available in many countries. Linked to this is

the issue of poor motivation leading to high staff turnover where, for example, librarians in public libraries are paid very low wages compared to university or private sector librarians. A high level of enthusiasm is needed to go abroad to study library and information science when there are no well-paid jobs available at home. In 2000, there were only four professional librarians in Belize, Central America, as it was not possible to train in the country. This resulted in a situation where all the other staff at the National Library, the University Library, the National Archives, and all public or school libraries were either insufficiently trained in short courses or were not trained at all (Krolak, 2000). In Denmark, the showcase of a modern, innovative and well-developed library system, librarians are professionally educated and earn more than teachers (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2004).

### ***Irrelevant Material***

It is not unusual to find rows of outdated textbooks on American or British politics or history, and books in foreign, often former colonial languages in local public libraries, or highly scientific books in a primary school library. Apart from the fact that many such books are culturally irrelevant, their use poses the danger of fostering a euro-centric bias. This can be reinforced by comparing high-quality, glossy books from Europe and North America with low-cost local publications. As most libraries in poorer countries cannot afford to buy only appropriate books in the appropriate language, they rely on foreign book donations or simply do not have enough relevant titles in the local language. Despite criticism of imposing foreign books on developing countries “*the demand for, and acute shortage of, books at all levels cannot be overestimated. Local publishing industries cannot currently meet all these needs ... In these circumstances there is a legitimate case for well managed donated book schemes, particularly when in the rich, industrialised world there is such a surplus of good books*” (Makotsi, 2004: 9).

### ***Colonial Model of Librarianship***

All over the world, the Anglo-American model of librarianship is used. But the introduction of a colonial model of librarianship has been criticised, particularly in Africa, where libraries were introduced at the end of the colonial era in the middle of the twentieth century. Until today, many librarians are trained in the Anglo-American tradition and many donor agencies and expatriates are using this model which is mainly based on the model of a European or North American literate society. But alternative and locally appropriate models are emerging and should be supported.

### ***Lack of Appropriate Training Opportunities***

Appropriate training and continuing education is needed to address the rapid social and technological changes in modern libraries. Training must be made relevant to local conditions, outdated syllabi reflecting colonial values need to be replaced and training programmes need to include knowledge of how to document and share indigenous knowledge in printed and non-printed formats. Modern library training must emphasise how to reach out to potential users and how to be at the centre of community development. Training should therefore include advocacy, public relations, and community mobilisation.

### ***Lack of Needs Analysis***

Many libraries are established without a professional needs analysis of the community, resulting in an information service based upon assumptions and not on actual needs. These libraries isolate themselves from the general public, often content to serve only a small, mainly urban-based, relatively well-off, educated elite. In Africa, a severe lack of professional librarians with research skills contributes to research being done by researchers and consultants rather than library practitioners (Mostert, 2001). Just as a needs analysis is necessary before establishing a service, continuing monitoring and evaluation with active community participation is also crucial to ensure that library services remain relevant.

### ***ICT Challenges***

Libraries are ideally placed to provide universal access to global information and to bridge the information gap between developed and developing countries. A survey of 22 public library services in ten English-speaking African countries showed that the majority of African libraries have yet to acquire computers (Mostert, 2001). Some libraries have computers, some even have Internet access for e-mail, but almost none provide access to information on the Internet. Most libraries will not have access to modern information technologies for various reasons, including a lack of the necessary infrastructure, such as telephone lines, electricity, software and hardware, and a lack of trained staff for maintenance and training in the use of computers. Since the late 1990s, outside funding has been invested in telecentres, but many of them have proved to be unsustainable due to the complex challenges mentioned above, including the reliance on continuing donor funding (Makotsi, 2004: 8). But many librarians see the huge investment in information technology with mixed feelings, as *"ICT cannot offer quick and easy solutions to the lack of reading, educational and information materials in Africa. Huge investment is needed to put in place the necessary infrastructure of telephone lines, electricity and to build human capacities. Books provide a complementary, flexible and low-cost medium for learning"* (Book Aid International, 2004). Furthermore, critical literacy skills are a prerequisite for using the Internet effectively and they have to be acquired through access to a wide range of reading materials.

### ***Inappropriate Buildings***

Books, computers and audio-visual materials are very sensitive and have to be protected from extreme weather conditions, be it rain and humidity or sun and heat. Ideally they need to be kept in a dry, temperate environment. In many countries this would require an air-conditioned environment. Another problem is the protection from theft. The building and library materials need to be protected by bars and proper doors. During office hours, ideally, a surveillance person, camera or appropriate equipment should prevent materials from being stolen. Protective measures are very cost-effective and are unaffordable for most libraries.

### ***Lack of Co-operation and a National Information Policy***

Lack of co-operation among agencies involved in library-related work weakens the system and creates unnecessary duplication or even competition. If publicly available resources are scarce, co-operation and resource sharing become a solution. Cooperation is also necessary between various information providers in a country, including governmental and non-governmental organisations, the media, corporate companies and the publishing sector. In a

developing country with a weak publishing sector, unpublished material is of great value to the public, especially if the material supports national development. But due to the lack of training, many librarians do not know how to make such material accessible to the public. Another problem is the lack of a national information policy, regulating the most efficient handling of materials. B.J. Mostert recommends that “*A written information policy should be made a prerequisite for every country involved in information provision. The lack of an information policy coordinating the acquisition, organization, and dissemination of information, especially for developmental purposes, tends to be a major problem in all the African countries. The absence of such a policy leads to poor coordination between related information systems as well as to unnecessary competition*” (Mostert, 2001). By comparison with African libraries, libraries in Singapore play a crucial role in a national information strategy and are considered a strategic priority. They are part of a greater vision and development that is actively moving the country towards a knowledge economy. At the National Day in 1993, the Premier Goh Chok Tong said in a speech: “*The future belongs to those countries, whose citizens know how to handle information, knowledge and technology productively. These are today the most important factors for economic success, not the traditional resources or production factors*” (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2004: 63).

Against all odds, even in very poor countries, libraries provide practical and cost-effective solutions for creating literate environments. With innovative ideas they share books and supplementary reading materials with excluded communities, for example using donkeys in Zimbabwe and Columbia, using camels and motor bikes in Kenya, using elephants in India and boats in Benin and Argentina.<sup>8</sup> Another innovative scheme for establishing a reading culture, opening up the perception that books can be fun and are not just associated with study for exams, are the East African children's reading tents. Library services and book development councils have introduced them in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe to combine reading with enjoyable activities such as games, competitions and story-telling.<sup>9</sup>

## **VI. International Support for Libraries**

There is an urgent need for international support for libraries as many governments in poor countries simply cannot afford to establish effective library systems. Several governments, charities and private groups in the developed world have established book donation programs. Probably the most professional and complex examples of book donation agencies are Book Aid International (BAI) in the United Kingdom and the Canadian Organisation for Development through Education (CODE). Both organisations can look back on more than 40 years of professional support in developing countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. They work in partnership with public library services and the local book trade through the donation of books and learning resources, which are culturally relevant and increasingly locally published. They furthermore provide training and capacity building to maximise the effectiveness of their local partners. Many projects are with other overseas organisations along with those in local communities.

One example of the many innovative and interesting current projects of Book Aid International is in partnership with the British Council in Palestine, where they provide access to appropriate books for disadvantaged children in the West Bank and Gaza, including refugees, orphans, the urban poor and Bedouin communities (Books for Children in Palestine, 2002: 3).

Several case studies in this paper reveal the important role of (international) NGOs in providing access to reading materials to the general public, often in partnership with governments and other NGOs. This role is not merely restricted to initiating and financing projects but encompasses day to day management.

## **VII. Conclusion**

This paper shows the dynamic creativity and potential as well as the challenges for the involvement of libraries in creating literate environments for lifelong learning. It also shows that investing in books and libraries is at the heart of educational reform, literacy enhancement and sustaining literacy skills for life, leading subsequently to development and poverty reduction. By providing equitable access to information for all, libraries encourage critical citizenship in a global democratic society.

If policy- and decision makers recognise the value of literacy and libraries and the need to have a population that not only can read but will read, they must be willing to commit scarce resources towards the support of libraries. With sufficient investment and support, libraries will have a major positive impact on the achievement of Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals.

### ***Policy Recommendations***

- Libraries have to be an essential part of a long-term policy framework for the whole education sector, embracing literacy, information provision and lifelong learning;
- Libraries must be supported by specific legislation and must be adequately financed by national and local governments;
- Libraries offer a unique and cost effective means of providing access to information for all by sharing resources;
- Libraries have to be based on a community needs analysis and constantly make their services relevant to community needs;
- Libraries have to offer a wide range of activities, with a special focus on reaching out to marginalized groups;
- Libraries are the logical access point and support centre for community-based literacy programs. They have to particularly support family literacy, as a literate home environment is the key factor in enabling and motivating children to read;
- Libraries have to co-operate and network with other education stakeholders and the local publishing industry;
- Libraries can only be effectively strengthened as part of the local book chain.

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<sup>1</sup> "Examples of alternative models can now be found throughout Africa. One is that of community resource centres, which aim to provide reference and referral services to the whole community. These centres are often located in schools and tend to be mostly used by school children and their teachers. Notable examples are found in the rural areas of Botswana and Zimbabwe; Ghana has its Community Libraries Project; they also exist in most other African countries. Another is the establishment of teachers' resource centres, now found throughout Africa, e.g. Eritrea, Kenya, Namibia, Uganda and Zambia. They are set up to serve a number of schools and stock a variety of teachers' and pupils' textbooks, reference books and sets of books for use in the classroom. There has been a resurgence of interest in the use of classroom libraries and book box libraries; examples are found in Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa. South Africa has a pilot project involving the establishment of Learning and Education Centres and is experimenting with virtual libraries through the School Net project. Increasingly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), rather than governments, are providing support in the provision of reading materials; there is the Ghana Book Trust; READ in South Africa is well known; BLD (Bibliothèque-Lecture-Développement – Libraries-Reading-Development) is a recent arrival in Senegal" (Rosenberg, 2000: 8).

<sup>2</sup> "A respondent in Bangladesh reported: 'Most of the students do not read books other than prescribed books. The curriculum and learning processes in primary education do not encourage students to read or consult books other than the textbooks. There are no libraries attached to the schools or near them' (ADEA/UNESCO survey 1999). A study in Samoa (UNESCO/Danida case-studies: Samoa) found that in nine of the ten schools examined there were few books of any kind, whether instructional or recreational readers, textbooks or teachers' guides. The books that were there tended to be library books donated from overseas (many of them outdated or inappropriate to local culture), instructional readers from New Zealand and a small number of readers produced locally in the early 1990s. It appeared that the few available books were rarely used. Books were found on staff room shelves, in locked cupboards and still in packing boxes. Many were kept in the principal's office and access to them was not easy. Teachers relied instead on the blackboard, charts they had prepared themselves and self-produced books. Children sat on woven mats and read together as the teacher pointed to each word. The rural schools had grid wire windows and on wet, windy days learning material on the walls was ruined. In southern Africa, better-than-average libraries were usually found in secondary schools and were heavily reliant on parental support. In Mali, a school library might consist of only 50 to 100 books, including textbooks, in a cupboard in the principal's office; most secondary schools had libraries but lacked suitable premises and budgets for them. In South Africa, the Department of Education and Training, which was responsible for the education of black Africans under Apartheid, did not officially acknowledge the role of school libraries until 1983. In 1997, the Education Foundation found that only 17% of schools in South Africa had libraries and they were concentrated in white and Indian and, to lesser extent, 'coloured' school. In countries such as Mozambique and Cambodia, schools and any libraries they had were destroyed by war. In Ethiopia, librarians were held directly responsible for any loss of books and were accordingly reluctant to lend them" (Montagnes, 2001: 27).

<sup>3</sup> "Regular access to books while at school and developing the habit of reading for pleasure have dramatic results in terms of increased vocabulary, text comprehension, and an improvement in writing skills and self expression. In an experiment in Sri Lanka in 1996 described by Elley, the provision of basic collections of attractive reading materials and the introduction of very simple practices, such as a silent reading period at the beginning of the school day and the reading of stories to children, almost doubled reading scores in a few months. If there is a significant general improvement in reading, comprehension and writing skills, it is bound to have an impact on learning and performance in all other curriculum subjects" (Makotsi, 2004: 5).

<sup>4</sup> A 5-year project run by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in Germany from 1995 to 2000 supported co-operation between schools and libraries. Activities included guided tours to libraries, reading sessions and project weeks. It was important to include library materials and library use in the daily curriculum and to aim at sustaining the project after its formal ending. As a result of the project, the participating libraries have gained 73% more new young members, the target group borrowed 33% more material from the library than before and 37% of students said that the project encouraged them to read for fun (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> "In an effort to promote a reading culture in Malawi, the Malawi National Library Service (MNLS) provides a variety of community information services. A collection of HIV/AIDS is making a substantial contribution to the HIV/AIDS campaign. In the absence of a cure or vaccine, the only effective way to control its spread is by information and education. The role of the MNLS in this campaign is to provide a special collection of reading materials on HIV/AIDS. Other priority areas in the library service include gender, democracy, human rights,

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good government, family planning, environmental protection, youth development and appropriate technology ... There are also newspapers and journals, posters, wall charts, commercial advertisements, notices about items for sale and course announcements all of which provide public information in an effort to attract people to the library and promote reading and information seeking habits. The MNLS works very closely with a whole range of institutions by strengthening their library and information centres and has established over 1,300 small library centres in schools, community centres, churches and other places as access points mainly in rural areas to bring books and information closer to people" (Community Information, 2002: 3).

<sup>6</sup> The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto of 1949, revised in 1972 and 1994 states that: "Freedom, prosperity and the development of society and of individuals are fundamental human values. They will only be attained through the ability of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society. Constructive participation and the development of democracy depend on satisfactory education as well as on free and unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information. The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides 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" (UNESCO, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> "The Village Reading Room (VRR) service was initiated in 1986 as a pilot exercise in twenty villages in the Kgatlang district. The first evaluation was extremely positive and the project was extended countrywide so that by 1994, when the second evaluation took place, there were no less than 54 in operation. The programme continues to this day although the rate of expansion has dropped from ten to three sites per year. The reading rooms were designed to support and extend library services to literacy graduates ... They were to be a joint project by adult educators from the Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFE), Village Development Committees and the Library Service. The latter would provide specialist supervision and stock and the Village Development Committees would identify locations, usually primary school classrooms, provide staff, who would be DNFE adult educators, and pay honoraria. Staffing was on a volunteer basis since it would be provided by adult educators already in receipt of salaries from elsewhere. As time passed, problems arose over exact lines of command and staffing is now provided by the Library Service directly. Village Development Committees retain responsibility for premises and local services" (Rosenberg, 2000: 137-138).

<sup>8</sup> In Zimbabwe, donkey cart mobile libraries are used to transport books from the regional library branches into the interior communities and rural areas (Makotsi, 2004: 7). In Columbia, book rucksacks with about 40 books and news magazines are brought by foot, donkey or any other available means of transportation to remote areas of the country (Döllgast, 2001). The Kenya National Library Service has introduced the Camel Mobile Library Service, where two camels bring boxes of books and a reading tent once a month to villages in the province of Garissa, in the north of Kenya (Betten, 2003: 54). These mobile libraries are also suitable for serving nomadic and refugee communities. Around Lake Nokoué in Benin there are several villages that can only be reached by boat. In 1997, a rowing boat library was introduced. The boat is twelve metres long and two metres wide and has a roof and benches for forty children. Furnished with boxes of books, it reaches several villages every day. Class by class students enter the boat library for one hour to return and borrow books or just enjoy reading or looking at them on the boat (Betten, 2003: 17). So called bibliolanchas (book boats) provide isolated schools and villages in the Paraná delta of Argentina and in the Amazon delta of Venezuela with reading materials, videos, CD-ROMs and a computer with Internet access (Held, 2001: 22).

<sup>9</sup> "Reading tents are organised in rural and urban poor communities by the Book Development Councils in each country, which bring together stakeholders in the book chain such as the national library services and the various Publishers, Library, Booksellers, Reading and Writers Associations that exist. Reading tents are usually held at one school but involve pupils from at least ten neighbouring schools. Teachers from all participating schools facilitate the activities which include reading competitions, poetry recitals, writing competitions, story-telling as well as singing, dancing and painting. In the process, teachers learn how to encourage reading, and are trained in basic library skills and book promotion. After the reading tent leaves, the books are donated to the host school, and are later circulated among the other participating schools. All the books used are storybooks or readers published in Africa and the UK and are chosen because of the appeal to the children involved. Some of the children that take part in the reading tents around the country are invited to take part in the National Reading tent that takes place in the capital cities during National Book Week. In September 2004, for example, children (and their parents) came from all over Kenya to take part in the National Reading Tent during Kenya Book Week in Nairobi. Some of these children had never been outside their village, let alone to Nairobi, so it was an exciting time for all involved" (Aslett, Winter 2004: 6).

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