

Community libraries have a vital role to play in the battle against illiteracy, alliteracy and social exclusion

The opening of a new library in a rural community in KwaZulu-Natal.
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COMMUNITY LIBRARIES tackle inequalities in South Africa

Community libraries can play an important role in tackling inequalities in South Africa by making a wide range of amenities accessible to the financially challenged. *Nampombe Mnkeni-Saurombe* and *Nomusa Zimu* analyse the achievements and challenges of the Department of Arts and Culture's (DAC) conditional grant community library project.

Community libraries are internationally recognised as social institutions that can effect social and economic transformation in society. In South Africa, this is clearly recognised by the government's provision of a conditional grant for the development of community libraries in the country.

The aim of this project, started by DAC in 2007 and which will continue until 2013, is to develop informed citizens who are able to participate in the global information and knowledge economy. DAC plans to achieve this aim by transforming urban and rural community library infrastructures, facilities and services with special emphasis on previously disadvantaged communities.

We conducted a literature review on issues pertaining to community libraries and their role in the fight against inequalities in society and analysed minutes from meetings on reports from provincial and national DAC offices – in this instance meetings of the conditional grant community libraries project held in Parliament in April 2010 and May 2011 (available online on Parliament's website).

Successes

Minutes from parliamentary meetings indicate that, to date, 25 new community libraries have been built and 116 community libraries upgraded through the project. The upgrading included providing facilities for the visually impaired, boosting collections to reflect diversity in South Africa, hiring and training staff, as well as upgrading or installing information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure.

Challenges and opportunities

Illiteracy and alliteracy (a lack of interest in reading and using available resources) are major challenges in our society. According to the South African Institute of Race Relations' 2009/10 education report, about 2.9 million people over the age of 15 in South Africa were unable to read and write.

Social exclusion is not only financial poverty but can be described as an environment where people or areas face a combination of problems such as unemployment, poor skills, discrimination, low incomes, poor housing, a high crime rate and family breakdown.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) and the digital divide are synonymous. Lack of connectivity prevents people, especially in rural areas, from utilising ICTs for work, educational and other purposes. In 2007, only 6% of people had access to the internet from home.

Conclusion and recommendations

Community libraries have a very significant role to play in these situations. To measure the effect of the project and whether it succeeded in fostering social inclusion in the long term, it is necessary to undertake comprehensive empirical research.

Strong policy is essential to cater for all the needs of the library information services sector, its services and implementation, and the finalisation of the draft South African Community Library and Information Services Bill will go a long way in providing a legal framework for uniform standards and norms countrywide.

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