

Building a Community Library: Preliminary Case Report of the Kwakupokela Library, Lusangazi, Malawi

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Abstract

This paper chronicles interventions to renovate and repurpose a community library in one of the poorest countries in the world; Malawi, where over 80% of the population lives below the poverty line (less than US\$1.25/day). This initial report is based on activities undertaken by a team of individuals with diverse expertise and cultural backgrounds, and a common vision for repurposing the Kwakupokela Community Library. To date, key achievements include: the Kwakupokela Educational Trust has been created and registered with the Malawi government as a non-governmental organization which now operates the library; a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed with Mzuzu University; new books have been donated; and both new and old library books have been processed; the dilapidated and relentlessly leaking roof has been replaced with new iron sheets; the ceiling has been fixed; and the inner walls painted. More importantly, the library has opened its doors to the community. Challenges remain for this ongoing initiative, and include outdated and limited information resources, sustainability of library operations, space shortages and hygiene issues, including lack of restrooms. Strategies have been developed to deal with the mentioned challenges, though their implementation will depend on availability of resources. This paper describes the role librarians can play in uplifting the living conditions of people in rural areas by taking relevant information resources to these segregated, neglected and dejected communities.

Keywords: Community engagement, community library, Malawi

1. Introduction

Many researchers have emphasized the need to provide rural dwellers with information that spans a variety of domains, such as vocation, sound decision making, and general wellbeing (Uzuegbu, 2016). Although numerous popular

forms of information sources for rural dwellers can be identified, such as TV, radio, newspapers, friends, family members, community leaders, religious leaders, local influential people, elderly persons, school and college teachers, and non-governmental (NGO) workers (Dutta 2009; Phiri, Chipeta and Chawinga, 2018), the library is a highly rated source of relevant and dependable information owing to librarians' expertise, skills and competencies in searching, retrieving and providing information to users of diverse needs (Uzuegbu, 2016). Rural library and information centres are key to scaling up the social-economic development of rural dwellers through the provision of information and communication services (Hoq, 2015). However, as much of the world leaps forward with access to information and concomitant technology, there are still countries and communities where the digital divide might be more accurately typified as a digital chasm. Malawi, located in sub-Saharan Africa, is one such setting.

1.1. Setting the context: Geographic, social and economic factors of Malawi

Malawi is land locked and the smallest country in Sub-Saharan Africa. The country shares its international borders with Tanzania to the north and north east, Zambia to the west and Mozambique to south and south west (National Statistical Office, 2017). A national population survey which was last conducted in 2008 recorded a human population of 13,077 million (National Statistical Office, 2008). Despite being one of the poorest countries, Malawi's population continues to expand at an alarming rate. For example, by 2014 the population had grown to 14.8 million (United Nations, 2014) and by 2017, the population had jumped to 17.22 million (National Statistical Office, 2017). Although the population is projected to hit 29 million by 2030 (United Nations, 2014), resources remain limited and the government is struggling to provide basic needs to its people who are living in abject poverty.

Latest results by the United Nations Development Programme (2016) positioned Malawi at 170 out of 188 countries and territories on the Human Development Index. Economic activities in Malawi are diverse but the agricultural sector remains the major activity. The country's Gross Domestic Product is US\$3.5 billion and its per capita income is US\$290 (United Nations, 2014); 9% of the population has electricity access (CIA Factbook, 2017). Up to 75% of the population lives below the poverty line of less than US\$1.25 per day (United Nations, 2014), and over 80% of the population reside in rural areas where there are no health services or electricity connectivity, and road infrastructure is appallingly poor. The agricultural sector contributes over 82% of the country's total earnings and contributes 28.7 percent of GDP (United Nations, 2014). More than 80 percent of export earnings are realized from the agriculture sector (Kaluwa, 2010; United Nations, 2014). Noteworthy, the same agricultural sector is the source of over 80% of national employment (Kaluwa, 2010). Malawi is therefore, one of the most densely populated, yet least developed countries. Challenges to development

have included: economic instability, corruption, high population growth rates, poor health and educational outcomes, and limited connectivity to the region and world (CIA Factbook, 2017). The country's literacy rate is estimated to be 62.1% (male 69.8%; female 55.2%); about 9.6% of the population are estimated to be internet users, radio and print newspapers are still the major media outlets (CIA Factbook, 2017).

The community of Lusangazi is located in the northern region of Malawi, just south of the city of Mzuzu. The opportunity to create a community library presented itself in 2017, when a school library that was no longer active became available for repurposing as a community library. This paper reports on the collaborative process that led to the opening of the library, and on plans for evaluating the impacts of access and use of the resource for local schoolchildren. People in the area are involved in various economic activities. These business enterprises are mostly cultivation of agricultural products: maize/corn, potatoes, tobacco, dairy, etc. To succeed in these small business enterprises, residents of Lusangazi can benefit from increased information access. This community is also the center for three secondary and five primary schools, none of which have libraries or information resources for students.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This paper describes a community organizing process to create the Kwakupokela community library. While there are several theoretical models of community organizing and community building (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2012), preliminary observation suggests this particular endeavor aligns most closely with Walter's (2004) description of community-building. This model or approach emphasizes collaborative empowerment, and organizing within the community by leveraging community assets and strengths (Walter, 2004). In the case of the Lusangazi community, those assets were vital to the repurposing of the library. First, the library initiative has the full support from the group village headman, an influential leader in the community. During the opening ceremony of the library, he expressed his support and engagement, "the library is something the community will cherish and utilize to the maximum; my village heads present here and myself will encourage our people to come and use this library." In a tangible demonstration of their support, traditional leaders in the community donated the land on which the library building is located. More importantly, there are three volunteers from the local community who are running the library. Another strength is that head teachers from primary and secondary schools within the community have welcomed the establishment of the library and are encouraging their students and pupils to make regular use of the library resources.

This paper describes the preliminary groundwork of creating the community library, and outlines future research opportunities that the library will enable. The research questions below will be used to guide further inquiry on the library's

impact. Due to various challenges such as infrastructure and the COVID-19 pandemic, as of this writing, we do not yet have specific results to report.

1.3. Research questions

Beyond investigation and description of the process of the creation of the Kwakupokela community library in an under-resourced area, as the project moves forward, research questions which will be addressed include:

RQ1: What are the usage and circulation rates for the Kwakupokela Community Library?

RQ2: Can the Kwakupokela Community Library have a positive impact on literacy rates and standardized test scores for local schoolchildren?

RQ3: Can the Kwakupokela Community Library serve as a model for a collaborative approach to delivering library services in under-resourced areas?

RQ4: What are the challenges faced in running the Kwakupokela Community Library and what localized strategies are being used to address these challenges?

2. Methodology

The process of reopening of the library and repurposing from school to community-based library will be examined through a case study approach. To address RQ1, data will be collected and recorded on attendance and circulation of resources; this data will be used to assess usage rates. For RQ2, baseline data on literacy rates and test scores will be collected through collaboration with local primary schools. Once the library has remained open and operational for a period of time, test scores for 30 regular library users will be compared with 30 matched controls who are not library users. The third research question, RQ3, reaches farther into the future. For this investigation, it is the hope that the collaborative model borne out of the Kwakupokela experience will be tested elsewhere in Malawi. For RQ4, data will be based on operational experience as the library is open, in addition to data collected from users.

2.1. Preliminary Assessment

Repurposing of the Kwakupokela Library

In late April 2017, a visiting nurse educator (from the US) was invited by a local Malawian journalist to visit a village school. The school had been founded by a Scottish woman who moved to northern Malawi in the 1950s; she resided in a home adjacent to the school until her death. She officially turned the school over to the Malawian government some years ago, but maintained the library as a separate facility. After she sustained a severe hip injury in 2015, she was no

longer able to climb the steps to the library building, so the facility was closed thereby discontinuing access for hundreds of local residents to information resources and the facility. The roof and building were in need of repair, and in the tropical climate, many of the materials had degraded through exposure to moisture, mold, dust, and what was likely mouse and bat feces (Sterling, personal interview, 2017).

Students were the group most affected by the library closure of the library; the only alternative means of accessing information resources was to walk a distance of over 20 kilometers (one way) to access information resources at the public library in Mzuzu City. Worse still, the public library does not have current and relevant information resources for primary and secondary school students; it mainly provides a limited reading space. Although libraries, and in particular public libraries, are well positioned to provide rural-based information services, they are faced with numerous challenges that undermine and frustrate their efforts to fulfill this role (Uzuegbu, 2016). After visiting the library, the nurse educator (J)¹ reached out to a visiting Fulbright scholar, who is a librarian (MG). Both J and MG were affiliated with Mzuzu University (MZUNI) for their educational activities during their time in Malawi. After touring the library, they met with local community members to assess interest in restoration and renewed operation of the facility. The local village tribal leader expressed keen interest in creating a community library, one that provided access to all community members, not just enrolled schoolchildren. He identified a qualified volunteer (D, a former headmaster at the school) to spearhead the efforts. Shortly thereafter, J and MG reached out to members of the MZUNI Department of Library Sciences, and one of the Lecturers (W) enthusiastically joined in the efforts; W also recruited the University Librarian.

First steps included practical tasks, such as cleaning and painting, and sorting through the library materials. These were all completed through volunteer efforts. Many of the books had been donated from discards of school and public libraries in Scotland and were outdated and/or damaged, and were removed from the collection. Fundraising efforts, largely in the US through a GoFundMe campaign, were started and continue; initial funds were used to replace the damaged roof and to install electricity. Another separate donation enabled newer, more relevant materials to be acquired, in order to update the collection. These were procured through the African Books Collective, an African owned distribution outlet for materials by African authors. Besides a variety of children's and young adult titles, all of the titles by Malawian authors and with Malawian subjects were purchased, and have now been added to the library collection.

To ensure future oversight and operation of the facility, the Kwakupokela Educational Trust was created and registered with the Office of Registrar's General as a NGO; a local lawyer, identified by community members, volunteered time to assist with this process. A constitution was created and adopted, and a board of

1 First initials of the individuals involved in the project are used here in naming.

directors established. The composition of the board is dominated by members from the local community with additional representation of village headmen and local University librarians, students and volunteers. As it moves forward, the hope is that the Kwakupokela Educational Trust will expand its focus to other community-driven educational related activities, such as promoting access to ICTs; improving adult literacy rates; promoting enrollment rates in local schools; and empowerment of youth and vulnerable girls and women in the community.

After the Trust was registered as an NGO, local and international organizational partners were identified to assist with fulfilling the goals of the Trust. As a result, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) has been signed with Mzuzu University. The two institutions have committed to working together in the provision of information services to the local community through the Kwakupokela Community Library. The MoU has enabled students from the Department of Library and Information Sciences at Mzuzu University to volunteer to process books for the library, and two final year students completed their practical course by serving at the library. Mzuzu University's engagement in this project is part of fulfillment of its mission which commits the University to engage in outreach services.

2.2. Challenges to date and their solutions

In spite of the progress made in repurposing and opening the library, the initiative has not been short of challenges, most of which stem from limited financial resources. The largest challenge has already been described, the library has very old books which were mainly donated by school libraries in Scotland. The books are no longer relevant to the modern world and more so, they are less relevant to Malawian context because they were written to benefit the European audience. Two initiatives have been taken to address this challenge. First, a donation was made to procure items through the African Books Collective, an African owned organization that serves as a publishing distribution outlet for African books and allows for direct, secure shipment to Malawi. Almost all of these books were written by Malawian authors; presently they are in high demand. The second challenge is that the library is serving various primary and secondary schools which have limited textbooks.



With the opening of this library, pupils and students had high expectations for finding text books included in the collection, there was widespread disappointment when this was not the case. Donations in 2018-20 have been earmarked for procurement of core textbooks. The board of the Kwakupokela Educational Trust continue to work on fundraising activities to raise more money locally and nationally. Figure 1 shows photos of the library during the 2017 activities.

Although the current building appears to have ample space, it is likely this space will quickly be filled, especially when the primary and secondary school textbooks arrive. It is projected that the library will grapple to accommodate a large proportion of the 800 local secondary school students and more than 3,000 primary school pupils from the surrounding communities. Unfortunately, the current space can only support less than 50 users at a time. The solution to this disturbing problem will be to source money that can be used to finalize building the ground floor of the library structure which is wide open (as shown in the photos). It is projected that there is a need to raise up to \$6,000USD to undergo this capital campaign and finalize this project.

Despite opening the library for community use, hygiene issues are another key concern, as there are no facilities or toilets. Because there is no running water in the area, the best option for a toilet is to dig a traditional kind of toilet, such as a pit latrine. Some patrons have been using the bush, which poses inherent danger, there are very dangerous poisonous snakes (e.g. cobra, black mamba, green mamba) that roam back and forth in the nearby forest, not to mention hygiene concerns.

Another, and of course major, area of concern is sustainability of the community library initiative. As already highlighted, the library has been established through external funding mechanisms, as such it remains at the mercy of well-wishers, and any cut of assistance will collapse its operations. In addition, the library is run by volunteer staff who are not receiving any remuneration for their efforts. In fact, Hoq (2015) warns that no library should bank its long-term survival on the basis of well-wishers such as local people and infrequent donations from kindhearted people. To ensure its sustainability, there is a plan to introduce reprographic services (printing, photocopying, scanning and laminating) which users can access by paying a small fee. The money raised will then be used to pay electricity and water bills and to offset other general operational issues. These efforts will require about US\$5,000. There are also plans to introduce Internet service in the library; this is necessary because as the world is increasingly technologically driven “rural libraries also have to think about emerging issues like striking a balance between traditional and technology based services” (Hoq, 2015:299). In this way, the hope is that the library will operate as a typical community library, or “as an information center located in a village or suburban area, catering to the information needs of the rural people by providing services like reading room and circulation, reference, photocopying, newspaper clipping, etc.” (Hoq, 2015:295).

3. Discussion

There is a long history of development projects in under-resourced settings where input from local community members was not solicited, or was overlooked or disregarded. This reality was considered during the re-opening the library in Lusangazi, as was whether the model of the western public library was appropriate for a rural village in northern Malawi. These issues were addressed by involving local village and community members from the start, and by asking community members if they thought it made sense to re-open the facility. After enthusiastic agreement that this was the course they wanted to pursue, they described their vision of a community library. Initial expectations for the facility included: to see the building opened as a place for students to study, and to make a variety of newer materials available, including textbooks. A computer lab and a maker space were wistfully mentioned, but these were categorized as future efforts that would require a greater commitment of resources and stakeholder involvement.

To address the expressed need for newer materials, efforts to provide more new books continue. Circulation records and patron surveys will guide collection development and weeding will continue as new books replace those which are outdated and in disrepair. The need to base decisions in procuring information resources should be predicated on the needs of users, so the collaborative team of library science researchers from Mzuzu University and the University of North Carolina will conduct periodic user information needs assessments and circulation data analysis to assure materials and resources procurement are relevant and satisfy the community's information needs. This approach is particularly salient in this context, where there is the need for library professionals to conduct field experiments in order to inform practices that are "rural-oriented, practical and replicable models that will be effective for rural information delivery across Sub-Saharan Africa" (Uzuegbu, 2016:49).

A local young man spearheading the efforts on voluntary basis, D, is now enrolled in a certificate program in library science through donated funding. Upon completion of his studies, he is expected to give back to the community by working in the community library; he is also expected to become a role model for youth in the community. This is important, as it embraces the concept that capacity building programs should be arranged for library staff to effectively serve the information community needs (Hoq, 2015). As the Kwakupokela Community Library moves forward, community and board members recognize that the greatest challenge is sustainability. They have addressed some of these concerns by registering as a NGO, and by leveraging community assets, including local expertise and support. Table 1 depicts achievements made between 2016-18.

Table 1 Achievements from 2016-18

Milestones	Amount (US\$)
Installing new roof	800
Installing ceiling in the library reading room	600
Painting inner walls of the library	200
Installing electrical wiring plus application fees	230
Re-opening of the library	Community Volunteers
Sponsoring community member to obtain library certificate.	550
Purchase of relevant and current books	400
Registering of the Kwakupokela Education Trust as an NGO with the Malawi government.	Volunteer lawyer 108 for processing fees
Signing of a MoU with Mzuzu University (a public university)	
Processing of books using the Dewey Decimal Scheme	Volunteers - Students from Mzuzu University
Purchase of text books for school students	550
Opening of bank account. Details of the account: Name: Kwakupokela Education Trust Bank Name: National Bank of Malawi Account Number: 1004752909. Type: Savings	600 (donations deposited)

Another key aspect that will be needed to be addressed in the future is technology. The library currently wears the face of a typical old-fashioned and traditional one; there is not even a single computer, yet contemporary literature underscores that ICTs have become inherent and natural components of any library.

4. Conclusion

As we consider the mission of libraries in the digital age, it is important to recognize that there are still regions and communities with little or no access, not only to digital resources, but to any type of library materials. The community library in Lusangazi can serve as model of leveraging community engagement and support to build a library in an under-resourced community. Leveraging community assets is key to building a successful community library. Involvement in this initiative thus far has demonstrated that collaboration and team work are paramount toward the realization of an equitable information society, even in the poorest countries like Malawi. This library initiative, which is slowly proving to be a success, has enabled us to answer the question posed by Uzuegbu (2016:50): “whose job is it to consistently collect, organize, repackage and communicate appropriate information to people living in rural communities and

villages in Sub-Saharan Africa?" Librarians are best positioned to fulfill this role. Librarians should not focus on identifying and reporting problems associated with the provision of rural-based information services through a huge corpus of studies; rather, they need to prove their relevance and value to the society by engaging in rural information outreach programs. This community initiative is one step toward helping to empower people in Lusangazi toward actions that will transform lives, and allow a greater sense of independence.

Future reports will analyze and tabulate findings from the empirical studies described in the methodology section and describe the impact of this library initiative on the members of the Lusangazi community.

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Sažetak

Izgradnja narodne knjižnice: prethodno izvješće o slučaju knjižnice Kwakupokela, u Lusangaziju, u Malaviju

U ovom se radu opisuju aktivnosti usmjerene na obnovu i prenamjenu narodne knjižnice u jednoj od najsiromašnijih zemalja svijeta, u Malaviju, gdje više od 80 % stanovništva živi ispod granice siromaštva (manje od 1,25 američkih dolara dnevno). Ovo se prethodno priopćenje temelji na aktivnostima koje je poduzimao tim pojedinaca raznih struka i kultura sa zajedničkom vizijom prenamjene narodne knjižnice Kwakupokela. Dosadašnja ključna postignuća uključuju sljedeće: ustanovljena je zaklada *Kwakupokela Educational Trust* koja je registrirana pri vladi Malavija kao nevladina organizacija i koja sada upravlja knjižnicom, potpisan je Memorandum o razumijevanju (MoU) sa Sveučilištem u Mzuzu, donirane su nove knjige, obrađene su i nove i stare knjige knjižničkog fonda, dotrajali krov, koji je neumoljivo prokišnjavao, zamijenjen je novim metalnim pločama, strop je fiksiran, a unutarnji su zidovi oslikani. Ono što je još važnije, knjižnica je otvorila svoja vrata zajednici. Izazovi pred ovom inicijativom u tijeku i dalje su zastarjeli i ograničeni izvori informacija, održivost rada knjižnice, nedostatak prostora i pitanje higijenskih uvjeta, uključujući nedostatak zahoda. Razvijene su strategije za suočavanje sa spomenutim izazovima, no njihova će provedba ovisiti o dostupnosti sredstava. U ovome se radu opisuje uloga koju knjižničari mogu imati u poboljšanju životnih uvjeta ljudi u ruralnim područjima, osiguranjem relevantnih izvora informacija u ovim odvojenim, zanemarenim i odbačenim zajednicama.

Ključne riječi: uključenost u zajednicu, narodna knjižnica, Malavi