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The role of libraries in a developing society – a Zimbabwean experience

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Library Power is an aspect on libraries that is only rarely spoken about. Still that power ought to be a basic part of all library advocacy, be regularly repeated by librarians and library friends at many occasions or whenever an opportunity appears

Library power – especially the power of public- and school libraries - is as well as book power of great importance as it presents the possibility for all people to create his/her own picture of the society, of science, of culture and of the world. To be able to create ones own opinion is basic for democracy, and to be able to read and to understand different kind of information in a critical way is basic for peoples ability to make op their own minds and become educated.

Fiction gives the readers not only the option to develop fantasy and abstract thinking; it actually forces the reader to use and exercise his/her fantasy ability. The ability to see what is not there, to see reality not only as it is, but how it could be.

Schools and school libraries in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is very well developed in one aspect. As a result of the fast development of the early 80:ies, schools in Zimbabwe are widely distributed in cities as well as in the rural areas.

I was working in Zimbabwe 1999- 2000. The average quality of the schools were very bad,

although there were some exceptions, especially some Christian schools belonging to strong international organisations, like the catholic church. In governmental schools 10 or 15 pupils had to share one textbook, or in some occasions just parts of a book. But there were some kind of school libraries in most schools. But the books were very few and torn books. The teachers didn't really know what to do with the library, and in some places the library was locked in the headmasters office, closed for both pupils and teachers. In other places the library was to be found in a small box or in a remote shed.

When I say library, I mean just a few books, most of them not usable for educational or library ambitions.

Although libraries were bad or non-existing the demand for books was - and is - immense. All kinds of reading materials are immediately read when distributed, and old magazines or newspapers are used not only for reading, but also for producing the pupil's own texts. A pair of scissors and some glue can make wonderful tools for education. By putting printed words together the students learn not only how to read, but also how to write and spell. The problem with non-existing or poor libraries becomes obvious whenever a question shall be answered, whenever the pupils are about to start any research of their own. Then they either have to trust the very rare textbooks or what the teachers or parents tell them.

If there are any parents, that is. In many cases these days, grandparents have to take care of the children in Zimbabwe as well as in many other countries in Southern Africa due to the AIDS pandemic.

Projects and NGO's

Some Zimbabwean NGO's like Zimbabwe Book Development Council work hard to empower school libraries and change them to become community libraries – a bit similar to public libraries. This is also one of the aims of RLRDP (Rural Libraries and Resources Development Programme), another NGO that promotes rural libraries as part of rural development. The former organisation, with which I worked, has some very important projects concerning local library development. The most interesting is Book Fund Project that focuses on the distribution of indigenously produced books and is a co-operation between libraries, book sellers, publishers and printers. Like most of the NGO's, ZBDC is donor funded, and for this project a majority of the money is directed to school libraries – more than 500 – over the whole nation. For the rather small amount of money the schools are allowed to select and buy books from a special regularly updated Book Fund Catalogue, with all available books that are published and available in Zimbabwe. To buy more than four copies of the same title is forbidden in order to promote a diversity of titles for a library.

An important part of the project were the library training workshops. The very aim of ZBDC is creating a reading culture by giving children the opportunity to meet and select books in a library.

RLRDP have produced a very useful handbook in how to manage a library. It is filled with small and practical tips on how to build a shelf (lack of shelves is a mayor problem) or how to fix a simple card catalogue. The organisation also promotes donkey cart libraries, and for the member libraries in Matabeleland and Manicaland, efficient training is regionally allocated by this innovative organisation.

I also want to mention an important local initiative, the Edward Ndlovu Memorial Trust Library in Gwanda, Matabeleland (Southern Zimbabwe), which is serving as a school library center for it's surrounding school libraries and is supported by a Swedish NGO, the Africa Groups of Sweden.

Together these organisations and many others form a loose network of small or medium small projects working towards similar goals.

Along with the Book Fund Project, the Children's Reading Tent, also managed by ZBDC, is extremely interesting. Anyone who have visited the annual Zimbabwe International Book Fair have met the tent, and probably also Pauline Mtuda who used to run it for ZBDC.

In this tent almost everything that has to do with children's reading is allowed to happen. The main goal for the tent is to show the power of the children's library. The tent act as an example of what such a library can offer. School classes are coming from all over the country just to read, or to listen to story telling, or to watch or perform theatre or music connected to books and reading.

Workshops take place where adults – mostly teachers but also many parents and grandparents as well as academics – participate. Papers are presented on almost any topic that has anything to do with children and reading and authors come and tell about their books and their writing.

The power of libraries becomes very obvious when you watch the big Children's Reading Tent filled with reading children. Reading or just looking at the many books is just what they have missed in school, what they long for, and what excites and stimulates their fantasy and their minds.

Reading and Fantasy

Let me focus for a short while on fantasy. In order to be able to use fantasy, there must be something to fantasise about. For a child who have nothing but some clothes and have seen nothing but some huts and some fields, fantasy do not carry him very far. He might dream about more food or more and bigger harvests. But hardly on how society could be changed, or on his own education. Children need books to give them trampolines for their minds. Reading itself is fantasising. By making these small black things that we call letters to become living pictures inside, fantasy is stimulated. Reading is promoting fantasy, the very ability that could bring to the child ideas on how the world could be changed to become a better place to live in.

This is why the idea about extended school libraries to become community libraries is so important. The content of such a library should deal with fantasy as well as practical information for daily life's use. Information on how to avoid HIV, on how to plant and harvest successfully, on how to handle cattle in the best way or on how to vote and use one's democratic rights, shall be mixed with reading for leisure and fantasy. Reading a good novel may give the child the opportunity to become another person or to travel to another part of the world; empowers them.

Reading is power. Reading makes you strong and able to decide the direction of life. It makes you informed, and it gives you the ability to understand other people and other peoples culture. Reading opens the mind for empathy. Understanding of information makes you a better decision maker. This means power for poor people, and in the long run development for poor countries. To start while they are young is a main strategy for ZBDC, and the very dynamic director Ms Miriam Bamhare.

Library training

In the Book Fund Project I was engaged in the planning of and the training of rural teacher librarians. The aim of the workshops was to give teachers enough skills and knowledge to handle a library and to make library plans for the individual libraries. Our goal was that these plans should include how to extend the library into a community library with library committees that involved persons from the surrounding society. I could talk for hours about the workshops themselves, but I will focus on the very strong commitment that all the teacher librarians showed. They didn't want to stop at night, and they wanted to start as early as possible in the morning. Some had to travel for days to reach their destination, and some

walked for tens of miles in the heat. These were not workshops where people just talked, they were pure hard work.

The three days workshops all ended with products to bring home, methods to use, and ways forward for everybody. Clusters of neighbour schools were formed for further contacts and training, and networks were created for information and contacts.

Experiences and the future

And this work still goes on. Just recently a new librarian from Sweden went to work for ZBDC, this time full time. To be present, to see and after some time also to understand what is happening and what are the needs, is essential for development work. I brought a lot back home that I now use in my own work as a county library adviser, especially methods and ways of teaching. Personal growth is of course another gift from my experiences as it was a true challenge for me to function in a totally new and unknown context.

It was often confused, and sometimes I thought that I could never understand why things happened like they did. After some time I learned that the most important way to act was to be less anxious, to trust things to happen and to trust peoples ability an will to make them happen.

Things never happened accordingly to my plans, but they happened and they turned out better than I had dreamed of.

Lack of education is a huge problem for the developing world, and literacy and information literacy just have to be promoted. Therefore public and school libraries should be main targets for aid from developing countries in order to create a situation where the developing countries could reach the ability to help themselves. The Swedish Library Association therefore co-operates not only with ZBDC, but also with Zimbabwe Library Association. The goal for this co-operation is libraries for all in order to promote democracy and a democratic and fruitful destiny for Zimbabwe. The Power of Libraries can make the difference between poverty and true development.

So catch them while they are young, just as Ms. Miriam Bamhare in ZBDC says.