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Libraries as development hubs: Naming the elephants in the room

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The potential for what is *aspirationally* discussed concerning libraries as development hubs is immense: yet there are some significant questions that need to be addressed if this potential is to truly be realised. This paper seeks to name some of the ‘elephants in the room’ by discussing pertinent issues and questions which arise, with particular reference to the South African context.

The theme of ‘libraries as development hubs’ is gaining a new level of focus and prominence within global LIS. The Millennium Development Goals for 2015 have been widely discussed and correlated with outcomes deliverable via LIS service frameworks (Forsyth, 2005; Nobvu & Koopman, 2008). With the 2015 “deadline” for the MDG’s fast approaching, a new set of post-2015 objectives is now being framed (United Nations, n.d.). Another paper presented at this conference discusses how Groenheuwel Public library in Drakenstein Municipality is addressing MDG’s (Sias, 2013). Colleagues have explored various angles in the literature, including libraries as development partners (Satgoor, 2008), re-considering professional boundaries (Raju, 2008), indigenous knowledge (Holmner, 2011), and combatting social exclusion (Hart, 2011, Stillwell 2011).

The multi-partner international initiative ‘Beyond Access’ seeks to highlight global examples of libraries demonstrating good and innovative practice, and to advocate for NGO’s and governments to partner with libraries for development. (Beyond Access, n.d. (a)). One highlighted example is the multi-agency work that occurs within and around the community library at Masiphumelele. (Beyond Access, n.d. (b))

In a discussion with IFLA’s Director of Policy and Advocacy, Stewart Hamilton, it was indicated that IFLA is creating ‘Development 101’ training materials for LIS practitioners to raise their awareness of development issues and possible partnerships in this realm. IFLA is also seeking to promote dialogue between LIS practitioners on one hand and development practitioners and NGO’s on the other. The objective is that libraries should be seen as the ‘obvious choice’ for multi-agency work centred around libraries as development hubs. (Personal communication, 22 April, 2013). The *IFLA Statement on Libraries and Development*, released in August of this year, explicitly addresses this area. Having outlined the means by which libraries contribute to development goals, the statement urges policymakers and development practitioners to:

...leverage these powerful existing resources and ensure that any post 2015 development framework:

- Recognises the role of access to information as a fundamental element supporting development
- Acknowledges the role of libraries and librarians as agents for development

- Encourages UN Member State support of the information frameworks underpinning development – providing networks, information and human resources – such as libraries and other public interest bodies (IFLA, 2013)

The role of libraries as transformational agencies for personal, community and national development is clearly recognised within national government strategy and policy in South Africa in the *LIS Transformation Charter* (Department of Arts and Culture, 2009) and in other documents. The priority given to addressing shortfalls in LIS capacity is indicated in the substantial funds already allocated within the Conditional Grant schemes.

While it may not always *explicitly* cite the role of libraries in realising the ambitious vision for South Africa's development set out in the recent 'National Development Plan 2030' (National Planning Commission, 2012), it is worth bringing this relationship into the foreground. Whatever sectors in the plan we might highlight, the ability to effectively utilise relevant information and knowledge underpins and is mission-critical to ALL the specified development targets that have been set. The infomediary work of skilled information professionals will therefore be of fundamental importance in assisting South Africa's citizens, communities, businesses and government agencies to achieve the goals set out in NDP 2030. In whatever form and context they exist, libraries and librarians will be key drivers in facilitating South Africa's rise. The LIS profession needs to understand the power and importance of its role in that mission, and to make sure that policy makers, funders and decision makers also understand it! That is our privilege and responsibility in whatever sector of LIS we work. Librarians hold the future.

However. It is one thing to identify the *potential* of what might be achieved in an ideal world of unlimited physical, financial, human and information resources. It is quite another to take a pragmatic view within what is actually available and achievable. I now want consider 'the elephants in the room' that trouble our enthusiasm for the 'libraries for development' agenda. I want to identify several 'elephants' that we present challenges to be addressed and overcome.

ELEPHANT 1: EXISTING LIS INFRASTRUCTURE

At the most basic level, we are still dealing with the chronic legacy of underfunding and underdevelopment from the apartheid era. This negatively affects LIS capacity in terms of buildings, ICT and information resources, skills and staff. A core assumption of the "libraries for development" narrative appears to be that LIS infrastructure is substantially already in place, thus providing an attractive structural network for development partners to leverage. As we know, reality in South Africa is somewhat different, with very uneven and unequal capacity. While some libraries – perhaps largely in "developed" areas - may fit the bill, there are many others which need significant investment before they even attain base levels of "norms and standards". Paradoxically, while under-developed areas and libraries are likely to have the greatest need for additional development resources, they may be the least attractive to external bodies and funders. One wonders if sometimes investment in high-status, "flagship library" projects is deemed to deliver more returns in organisational kudos, more tangible "bang for buck", in comparison to the prospect of resourcing struggling small libraries with far more humble and less trumpetable outcomes.

Questions arise from consideration of the success of what are being cited as “flagship” models of LIS for development. Are these individual successes scalable on a wider basis? If service expansion and enhanced delivery depends on *ad hoc* procurement of external funding and partnerships, will it finally come down to which librarians are best at hustling? There are not unlimited opportunities or funds available to be tapped for resources. How then do we ensure equitable enhancement of LIS infrastructure, staff and skills, especially in those places which have been historically oppressed by systemic under-development? How can we capitalise on service enhancement within existing budgetary constraints?

Within the realm of looking at external partnerships and funding we should also be mindful of broader issues of African self-determination and the need to avoid the mental and material bondage which can arise from buying into “aid mentality”. We do well to critically evaluate the lure of large funds from abroad and the agendas of others that can come with them. In a globalising neoliberal economy it is possible to discern the desire to exploit (and, indeed, suppress) the increasing economic potential of Africans as the continent rises. There may be hidden costs in terms of cultivating a new neo-colonial dependency - the gift horse may have a new slave master riding it. The African LIS profession must continue to develop opportunities and structures to create and share knowledge. It is surely possible to devise pragmatic, simple and scalable strategies and toolkits which can be used within limited budgets and constrained operational contexts.

ELEPHANT 2: “LIBRARIES ARE TRUSTED ORGANISATIONS IN THE COMMUNITY”

A second core assumption in the “libraries for development” narratives is that development NGO’s should seek partnerships with libraries because of their already-existing “trusted status” within communities. As other papers in this conference discuss, if sections of a community feel that burning their library down is a valid means of expressing dissatisfaction, it is unlikely that the library has yet achieved this “trusted status”. Many writers have discussed the unhelpful legacy of the disconnection between the colonial “western” library systems and African realities (for example Amadi, 1981, Odi, 1991). As a hopeful example, we note that even though the proto-library at Masiphumelele was burnt down in 1999 during community disputes, the work done since proves it is possible to move beyond perceived irrelevance and hostility. The vibrant multi-functional library service is embedded in, and highly valued by, its community, and now gaining international recognition.

ELEPHANT 3: *LIBRARIES FOR DEVELOPMENT SKILL SET*

This leads us to a cluster of inter-related issues that constitute a very challenging elephant indeed! If we cumulatively consider the activities brought into discussions about “the potential of libraries as development hubs” we arrive at a daunting list of skills and competencies seemingly required of LIS practitioners. We find that librarians, in addition to their “core” professional skills, might also be required to be adept at knowledge management; capturing and disseminating indigenous knowledge; and facilitating informal education. They might also need to be business information advisors; information literacy and I.T. trainers; facilitators of the empowerment of girls and women; mentors for the elderly, youth, the unemployed, the sick and the mentally ill; agricultural development workers; creative arts events managers; community gardeners; activists for local democracy; builders of partnerships with national and international NGO’s and funders; and deeply engaged community outreach and development workers!

The question which must be asked of this enormous elephant is: where are all these multi-talented library professionals, with such a diverse skillset, going to come from? Especially when even “basic” librarianship is already designated a “scarce skill”? How will colleagues in time-stretched services perform these functions? It is wildly optimistic (if not outright delusional!) to propose that ALL libraries in ALL communities can hope to establish and deliver such multi-functional services, either standalone or in partnerships – even if the need for these services remains real and urgent. Existing infrastructure realities might again seem to favour larger or urban libraries as more viable prospects for multi-agency partnerships. This leaves us questioning how - or whether - solo librarian and small, rural libraries fit into the picture.

How, then, do the skills and functions deemed to be the traditional “core of the profession” for LIS need to be augmented to create LIS professionals who can effectively innovate, lead and manage development-focused LIS services? The blurring of boundaries between once-discrete professional sectors makes the identity of the core of LIS a contested and ever-evolving area (Chute, 2012, Raju 2003). LIS departments in South Africa (and globally) already struggle to include all the subjects that might be deemed desirable within their degree schemes. It is difficult, therefore, to see how the great raft of additional “development” knowledge and competencies can be incorporated wholesale into the LIS curriculum. The answer can only be through greater facilitation of continuing professional development (CPD) that facilitates lifelong learning and development of skills throughout someone’s LIS career. A national policy framework is needed that supports and funds LIS research and development of courses, modules and sub-degree module clusters, and which funds practitioner participation in CPD. Development of new and cost-effective distance learning structures may be of benefit here, rather than piecemeal regional approaches. Further research is needed to identify the enhanced skill and competency set required by LIS professionals who will need to lead in the development framework.

ELEPHANT 4: LIS PRACTITIONER WORLDVIEW

Gavin Davis cogently sums up the transformation required to change the role of libraries in communities from “information storehouses” to de-institutionalised agencies where people can empower themselves (Davis, 2009). This requires a paradigm shift in the worldview, service philosophy and practice of LIS professionals. The work of David Lankes (2011) on what he terms “new librarianship” has much to commend it in re-framing of our worldview of the mission and value of libraries in our communities. Lankes contends that “the mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities” (Lankes, 2011, p.13). He advocates an embedded activist approach that continually engages in conversations with the community to facilitate its empowerment via the library service. This model is challengingly explored in some depth via a free online MOOC Master Class on *New Librarianship* which I strongly commend to colleagues. (School of Information Studies, Syracuse University, 2013).

Observation of integrated multi-agency service approaches in South Africa and the UK (specifically city library services in Nottingham and Edinburgh) suggests that a key to success is the leadership of a visionary and dynamic service manager who drives progress with great entrepreneurial energy and innovation. This highly active, outward-looking stance is the antithesis of the inward-looking, collection-management focussed paradigm associated with “traditional” librarianship. We therefore need to collectively consider how to cultivate this kind of mentality and outlook, rather than a “guardian” or “gatekeeper” mentality. A

pertinent question is whether an entrepreneurial mentality is something that can be “taught”, or whether it is principally a mode of perception intrinsic to a particular type of person. LIS schools must engage with teaching principles and theory, but this mind-set is far from universal in LIS practitioners.

CONCLUSION

Libraries really CAN deliver strongly on multiple fronts for development, but this requires serious engagement and investment from stakeholders in government, education, the profession and communities. Cross-domain partnership approaches for genuine collaboration that release synergies between stakeholders will be extremely important. We should aim to enhance opportunities and spaces for interaction, discussion and reflection, to foster growing “learning communities” of practice that work from the ground up to find solutions, whilst taking encouragement and input from wider initiatives where these are genuinely relevant and helpful. Focus and advocacy for “libraries for development” in the global profession is welcome – but must be tempered by pragmatism and an approach that eschews a western paternalism and “saviour” mentality. Let there be authentic partnerships of equals where *everybody* grows and learns.

The very serious commitment of the South African government to develop LIS is to be applauded. Those who hold high office and responsibility as policy makers and funders are urged to continue to prioritise and invest in the LIS infrastructure and in the development of skilled activist librarians. This is something that matters - and it matters *enormously* - because it underpins all of the development objectives that are laid out for the nation. Ultimately, what is at stake here is not LIS services, skills and infrastructure. These are means to an end: namely, the transformational impacts that information professionals can deliver. It is about facilitating social justice, social cohesion and the empowerment of ordinary people, communities and the nation, allowing everyone to reach their full human potential.

Rather than mention of South Africa evoking distressing images of burning libraries, what if the LIS sector became known for the burning passion of the activism and commitment with which information professionals are working to see their communities transformed?

We are faced with multiple challenges in a room full of elephants. There can be no quick fixes or simple solutions. Nonetheless, to acknowledge the realities with which we are faced is the first step to removing these elephants one chunk at a time.

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