

Chapter 4

Libraries as Portal for Knowledge Driven Rural Community Development: Cases from Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This case presents libraries as a portico through which individuals, communities, and nations can access information for developing themselves. Libraries have potentials to accommodate all types of information: printed, e-publication, audio-visual, and others. They can be used by both governments and their development partners to play a key role in the collection, production, organization, and dissemination of information to enhance socio-economic, emotional, and intellectual development of individuals and the communities. They can appeal to everyone, regardless of age, gender, economic background, interest, and other differences. This chapter specifically explores the role that public libraries play in helping youth to meet the information need for improving their lives and contributing to the development of their communities. To the knowledge of the authors, the stories presented in this chapter have not been documented before as authors researched on them in preparation for this chapter.

Botswana is a country in which the availability of information is among the highest priorities of needed resources for developing the country. It does not come as a surprise that by the year 2016, the government wants to see Botswana having been transformed into a society where information on the operations of government, private sector, and other organizations is freely available to all citizens. The National Development 9 paved a way for the setting up of community information centers aimed at providing

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CT services to all Batswana, both in rural and urban areas through the development of community information centers. These centers are among programs aimed to avail information that can make a difference in people's lives. Furthermore, the government is quite aware that it cannot reach its goal of an informed nation without the use of modern technologies, specifically computers and the Internet. In its long term vision, Vision 2016, the government stated that by the year 2016 Botswana should be able to use and apply the potential of computer equipment in many aspects of everyday life (Republic of Botswana, Presidential Task Force, 1997).

Realizing that the rural communities lag behind with information that can help improve their lives, the government has set up the Rural Communication Program (RCP) with a goal "to provide telecommunications services to the rural areas in the most cost effective, efficient, logical and transparent manner possible" (Ministry of Communication Science and Technology, 2006, p. 14). Among specific objectives of the Rural Communications Program (RCP) is using appropriate technology to provide services, and in this case, the Internet or computers have been used to augment information found in local libraries. The Botswana Long Term Vision 2016 stipulates as a challenge the need to ensure that all people in Botswana especially those in the rural areas or those who need special assistance, receive the same benefits, and achieve their maximum potential, and RCP is the main foundation on which efforts for availing information that reaches the rural communities are based. Rural here refers to isolated and poorly served communities. These are communities where the government has identified that essential and basic services are required as part of its social obligation and mandate to integrate these areas into economic and social development of the nation. While these communities are of interest in this chapter, the chapter draws some cases from urban places because Internet connectivity in the rural areas of Botswana is still a problem.

BACKGROUND

Libraries in Botswana are positively impacting the lives of young people in many respects. Significant breakthroughs come as a result of using the computer and Internet free of charge in public libraries. Stories presented in this case include those of a youth trained in a library on how to use computers. After this short training he pursued more studies and researched on ICT. He has now opened an Internet café in Lobatse using the Youth Grant. The business is doing very well and he is now sharing his success story as a way to motivate other people to use libraries as sources of livelihood and potential tools to eradicate poverty.

The government of Botswana through the Ministry of Youth and Culture provides the grant for funding youth. Young people are encouraged to come up with innovative ideas and if found

viable, they are funded to start their businesses. Another case is that of a youth who developed his website after being trained in the Lobatse public library. He is now into business of designing and developing sales for shops in and around Lobatse. He has also completed his business plan for website development for businesses using the library facility. The third case presented is that of a young person who used the library books to learn about designing and making an airplane. The young man was able to complete the project and the airplane was tested and was able to fly. His story was broadcasted and shared on the Botswana Television program although this was a one time off report and as such the future of his project remains unknown to the public.

Some libraries are also cultural centers, for example, Mmankgodi Community Library and Cultural Centre. These libraries promote culture and are used intensively during the cultural heri-

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