Everyone, Everywhere at Every Age

The Work of Libraries in Supporting Adult Literacy Globally

- **Libraries have a unique role to play in supporting literacy, especially for those outside of the formal education system, thanks to their proximity to learners, their scope for flexibility, and their ability to bring different actors together.**
- **This is as true in the Global South as elsewhere, with libraries providing their ability to offer practical literacy, as well as to act as a gateway towards other development opportunities.**
- **Nonetheless, libraries require investment in order to be able to deliver. In a number of the countries covered by the Global Alliance for Literacy, libraries have been integrated into national strategies – a key step for fully realising the potential the institutions offer.**

With the best part of a billion adults worldwide still lacking basic literacy skills, it is clear that much still needs to be done to achieve target 4.6[1] of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – achieving widespread literacy.

While there is a justifiable focus on youth, it is important not to forget the need also to invest in adults, who also have a right not only to education, but also to participation in economic, social and cultural life.

Thanks to improvements in life expectancy, those who are only barely above school age - still likely have many years ahead of them. Without the skills they need, these years lives risk being long and hard. This disadvantage can also be passed on to children, as parents with low literacy skills tend to find it more difficult to support their daughters and sons through education.

This adds up to a moral and practical obligation to find a way of reaching people who are no longer in the formal education system. As this article will argue, libraries – with the right staffing and support – offer a tried and tested infrastructure for doing this, including in the countries involved in the Global Alliance for Literacy (GAL).

Libraries and Life-Long Literacy: Experience to Date

The role of libraries in promoting literacy is well-established. Whether this is implicit – through promoting books and a love of reading in general – or targeted – through crafted programmes aimed at increasing the ability of users to make sense of texts – it is a long-standing, core part of library work.

This is recognised in the IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, which turns 25 this year, and which underlines the mission of libraries in 'supporting and participating in literacy activities and programmes for all age groups, and initiating such activities if necessary'[2].

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[1] *By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy*: United Nations Sustianable Development Goal 4 (consulted 8 September 2019), https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4

[2] IFLA, UNESCO (1994). See also Koontz, Christie and Gubbin, Barbara (2010), IFLA Public Library Service Guidelines, De Gruyter (p47): 'Reading, writing and the ability to use numbers are basic prerequisites to being an integrated and active member of society. Reading and writing are also the basic techniques

The specific nature of libraries can make them particularly effective as drivers of literacy. Unlike the formal education system, they are not focused on any particular age group (i.e. school-age children). They can have more flexibility in how they approach challenges such as adult literacy[3], rather than having to follow a particular curriculum, for example using more creative approaches to engage with learners[4].

While it cannot be denied that for some people, the concept of a library may appear intimidating, imaginative library authorities have proven themselves able to take their services out to users and engage them where they feel comfortable[5].

At the same time, there is also evidence of libraries having a specific attraction for some learners, who have positive associations or simply see it as something familiar and comfortable[6]. Indeed, this same status as a public-focused, values-orientated space can also be a driver for volunteers who want to give something back to their communities[7].

In their work to promote adult literacy more broadly, libraries have in particular sought to help groups which are most at risk of disadvantage[8]. One example of such a population is newcomers to communities – migrants, refugees, asylum seekers – who often struggle with literacy in the language of the host country. Indeed, libraries have arguably been providing services to speakers of other languages since the 1860s in countries like the United States[9].

Libraries have explored different means of supporting literacy and broader engagement among adults faced with the need to learn a new language as a precondition for successful integration. These efforts have included creating or providing materials which are relevant to the individuals concerned, for example through the subjects they tackle, or the author[10], through developing dual-language materials[11], or even simply through offering opportunities to spend time with locals[12]. The libraries undertaking such efforts have seen important pay-offs – support to parents has also benefitted children by giving them greater chances of educational success[13], while the parents have also then found it easier to engage in other services and opportunities[14].

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needed for making use of new communication systems. The public library should support activities that will enable people to make the best use of modern technology'.

[3] Hoerning (2017), p3
[4] Hernelahti and Kolehmainen (2015), p3
[5] Mackenzie (2015), p5
[6] Jamison (2015), p2
[7] Hoerning (2017), p3
[8] To note, the full list given by the IFLA Guidelines for Library-Based Literacy Programmes includes the following potential target groups: Young people who have dropped out of school; Unemployed young people; Women and older people, who have not had the opportunity to learn or practice reading, writing and numeracy skills (skills related to with numbers); Adults with literacy difficulties; People from different countries, languages, and ethnic groups; Migrant workers; Refugees; People in institutions, such as prisons or hospitals. IFLA (date unknown), https://www.ifla.org/publications/guidelines-for-library-based-literacy-programs
[9] Hoerning (2017), p2
[10] Willander (2016), p2,
[11] Barkouki (2016), p3
[12] Barckow (2017), p1, Barkouki (2016), p3
[13] Bon and Karien (2016), p2
[14] Barckow (2017), p7

A second example of a group at risk of marginalisation through low literacy is prisoners. Taking the case of Australia, those who end up in prison in the first place are more likely to suffer from insufficient reading and writing skills than those on the outside[15]. Promoting literacy among incarcerated adults can therefore be a means of getting them on the road to rehabilitation, with Western Australia looking to make prison libraries as much like public libraries as possible in order to make for an easy transition.

In particular, libraries there have looked to combine literacy efforts with support for parenting, understanding that recording a story for a daughter or son can be a powerful motivation for prisoners to improve their own skills[16].

A third example is people living in rural areas, who also face unique challenges. Again, libraries in Western Australia have driven efforts to help adults – in particular in Aboriginal communities – make the leap towards greater literacy skills through a mixture of travelling services, technology, and adapted technologies designed to avoid shame or discomfort[17].

A fourth example is people experiencing homelessness, who may find in the library the only place of sanctuary possible, as well as the only source of the texts and materials they need to continue or support education. In these cases, additional efforts are needed to ensure that people are not unnecessarily excluded for administrative reasons[18].

Overall, there is a solid body of evidence of the effectiveness of the work of libraries in promoting adult literacy, including among the groups who need it most, drawing on their unique characteristics. Yet is this only the case in those countries lucky enough to have the resources to invest in sense library systems?

Applying the Lessons to the Global South

It is true that much documentation of library practices – including the challenges encountered – comes from the Global North. However, this does not mean that libraries in the Global South are inactive[19], or that the types of action they can carry out in order to promote adult literacy are not relevant[20]. Indeed, the need for library interventions can be, arguably, stronger.

In particular where formal education only lasts for a few years, and often suffers from a lack of staff and other resources, a key challenge is to ensure that those skills which are learnt are not then lost – a 'relapse into illiteracy'. Additional effort – notably from libraries – is needed to ensure that rather than slipping back, adults are able to continue to learn throughout life, building the bridge between skills and application[21].

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[15] Jones (2014), p1
[16] Jones (2014), p1
[17] Jones (2014), p6
[18] Terrile (2016), p3
[19] Osuigwe and Mulindwa (2018), p2. The authors underline a readiness in African libraries to go beyond simple provision of books to developing new services tailored to the specific needs of communities.
[20] Jahani Yekta (2013, p4-5) underlines many of the same points about the importance of less formality and more flexibility, the possibility to offer childcare for mothers, and an opening to others services, for example, as reasons for the effectiveness of libraries in promoting literacy.
[21] Asselin et al (2014), p11

This brings us to the work of libraries to adapt their offer to the needs of their communities. There is a need for flexibility, both in terms of collections and services. Indeed, there is repeated insistence on the need to listen to communities and set down roots[22]. Key ways of doing this include having freedom about collections (in particular from local sources), rather than simply having to accept what is given to them by donors[23], and in developing literacy interventions which are focused on the development needs of the local community[24].

Just as in the cases cited in the first section, in looking to adapt, libraries can be called upon to develop interventions which respond to the needs of particular groups.

It is worth underlining, in particular, the case of women, who represent around two thirds of the total number of people with low literacy skills. Women often face a variety of disadvantages, from direct political, economic and social discrimination to a greater likelihood of being in a rural area or in precarious work[25]. A lack of access to literacy and education can then have major knock-on effects on families, with poorer health and life-chances for children also[26]. In the light of this, the fact that the gender literacy gap has not closed in the last 30 years is a real worry[27].

Similarly, many developing countries also have large migrant or refugee populations, which face the threat of marginalisation. Without efforts to build literacy as a foundation for integration, this not only risks creating divisions, but represents a loss of productive potential[28].

There are examples of programmes which do appear to have made a difference in these respects. The African Heritage Research Library and Cultural Centre in Oyo State, Nigeria, successfully engaged the local population (mainly women), becoming a hub for developing skills, and at the same time improving literacy. The programmes held there also meant that the library became a place where politicians and businessmen would come to engage the community[29].

Elsewhere, libraries in Palestine have used mobile services and home visits to bring literacy support to people who were otherwise ashamed of their low skills[30]. In Bangladesh, Ganokendra centres, many of which contain libraries, have proved their worth as sources and drivers of community pride and activism[31].

There are nonetheless clear challenges. As with any public service libraries are at risk of underinvestment. While it may be possible to do more with less, it certainly is not possible to do everything with nothing[32]. In recognising the importance of adult literacy, it is therefore important to note that for all of the advantages libraries have in providing a response, they cannot do this without basic funding and staffing.

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[22] Asselin et al (2014), p3-4
[23] Moyo and Chibaya (2017), p4
[24] Moyo and Chibaya (2017), p5
[25] Jahani Yekta (2013), p1
[26] Zimmerman (2017), p3
[27] Jahani Yekta (2013), p3
[28] Ahmad (2017), p14
[29] Bamigbola and Adetimirin (2014) p8-10
[30] Mohammad and Awad (2014), p3
[31] Alam (2014),p6
[32] Bamigbola and Adetimirin (2014), p11 underline how damaging a lack of reliable electricity, for example, can be.

In response, the most encouraging examples come from countries which make libraries part of their national development plans, and in particular their adult literacy strategies[33]. This does not need to be difficult, with many of the lessons learned, for example, from child literacy programmes also being applicable for adults. Of course this in turn requires the library field to mobilise, developing structures that can ensure common high standards, while also guaranteeing a responsiveness to local need in the way that skills are developed[34].

Initiatives in Global Alliance for Literacy Countries

As underlined in the previous section, there is strong potential for libraries to contribute to the response to the need for adult literacy in developing countries, and in particular those covered by the Global Alliance for Literacy (GAL). This contribution is already taking place in many cases, as highlighted in information submitted by librarians in the countries concerned. In a number of cases – significantly – this role has been recognised at the highest levels, with libraries incorporated into national-level strategies.

India's Reading Mission 2020, launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2017, looks to create 300 million new readers within five years. The Prime Minister has cited the Indian Public Library Movement a number of times in speeches, including its efforts to revitalise libraries and use them as key centres for building awareness, interest and connection with reading.

The Prime Minister's efforts here appear to be based on his own experience in Gujarat, where he launched Gujarat Reads, a programme that set the goal of having a library in every village. Other Indian States have taken similar steps – such as Kerala – in order to make for universal literacy.

In **Indonesia**, there is a growing awareness of the need to raise levels of literacy for all. With the country continuing to experience rapid population growth, there is a concern that without improved performance in international literacy surveys, the opportunity to become a global economic powerhouse will be wasted.

The government has therefore placed libraries at the heart of its strategies, working closely with the National Library. The Library itself has invested effort in building up an understanding of the state of libraries in Indonesia today, and defining baselines for literacy and reading, and related services.

While it is clear that there is much to do in order to ensure sufficient libraries and library staff, there has been welcome growth in Community Learning Centres – now over 4000 in total – most of which have a library attached. These are explicitly seen by users as places where they can find out how to improve their lives. In parallel, there has been further application of the lessons of the PerpuSeru project, which saw libraries refitted with new technologies and staff given the skills to help people use it in conjunction with core literacy training.

In **Bangladesh**, as mentioned previously in the article, the network of Ganokendras (People's Centres) contains almost 800 with a library attached. These have a literacy function at their core,

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[33] Katz (2015), p8
[34] Asselin et al (2014), p12

aiming to help people develop basic skills and turn them into practical outcomes, but have proved so successful that they have taken on the role of broader community centres.

Within this, a central team produces materials to help each one carry out its work, notably adapting texts to support practical and functional literacy for all[35]. In parallel, the existing public library network will also look to expand its own capacity to provide adult literacy in the coming years, through the British Council's Libraries Unlimited programme.

In **Côte d'Ivoire**, following years of political instability, Centres for Reading and Culture (Centres de Lecture et d'Animation Culturelle) have been revived in ten provinces, and are proving their value as centres not only for promoting access to, but also engagement with books. The same goes for **Mali**, where thirteen such centres have been opened, creating possibilities to promote literacy in dynamic ways,

Finally, in **Pakistan**, efforts to reinvigorate public libraries have received support from the British Council, which looks to encourage adults to see them as safe, welcoming, neutral spaces where they can look to address literacy challenges. There are also events and festivals which serve to promote outreach to new populations.

Elsewhere, there are powerful examples of initiatives taken at the local level to develop the skills adults need to understand and use information in a modern world.

In **Egypt**, a library in Shakia province has looked to help those people with next to no reading and writing ability to make progress, working with local volunteers. Almost all have improved their levels, and some have even graduated to start working with English.

In **Mexico** the University of Guadalajara (UdG) has a special programme, offered through the Juan José Arreola Public Library linked to the University. This is aimed at older people – hundreds in each cohort, and includes literacy, as well as English courses, mental and physical health, ICT, art and culture, among others. Elsewhere – in Michoacán and San Luis Potosí – there are also programmes to support literacy online.

Similarly in **China**, the focus is very much on online literacy for older people, especially as the country faces rapid population ageing. These projects – sometimes held in conjunction with efforts to get young people to read from paper – are aimed at ensuring that older people do not get left behind.

In **Nigeria**, as set out previously, the African Heritage Research and Cultural Centre has shown how powerful a draw a library offering adult literacy can be, and the extent to which it can power broader community development and empowerment.

Finally, in **Afghanistan**, a number of individual institutions are already active, such as the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU), which runs a network of 270 'ABLE' libraries which are regularly stocked with new materials – and their staff trained – in order to allow a wider range of people to access literature and improve their skills. Nonetheless, the lack of a network of public libraries continues to represent a barrier.

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[35] Alam (2014)

Conclusion

Overall, there is extensive evidence that the role of libraries in promoting literacy does not only apply throughout life, but also around the world. In a wide variety of different contexts, it is clear that libraries have a unique ability to welcome people throughout lives, to be flexible and responsive to the needs of communities (and of individuals within communities), and to bring together volunteers.

Given this potential, the example offered by those countries which have incorporated libraries into national literacy and reading strategies appears worth following. This approach, which offers a greater possibility of ensuring due recognition of, and support for libraries, should also allow for better coordination of library efforts with those of other actors engaged in promoting higher levels of adult literacy.

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