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Improving The Integration Of Public Reading In Cultural Policies Of Francophone Developing Countries.

AN APPROACH BASED ON TWENTY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN 18 COUNTRIES OF AFRICA, INDIAN OCEAN, MIDDLE EAST AND THE CARIBBEAN REGION

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Abstract / Resume

The question of public reading – of access to published works, newspapers, and to information in general – is a major challenge in developing countries.

Public reading does not replace education or literacy policies. It is far more important because it firmly establishes access to knowledge into day-to-day reality, and gives everyone the possibility of an opening to the world.

It meets the expectations of local populations, namely those in remote areas, as is shown by nearly three million admissions and more than one million books lent each year in the two hundred and thirteen Reading and cultural activity centres set up by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) in eighteen countries in Africa, the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean and the Middle East.

In addition to giving access to books and newspapers, the centres allow access to the media (radio, television, video), to computers, sometimes to the Internet. In addition to being public libraries, these centres host cultural activities such as conferences, theatrical and musical events, training sessions (on health, agriculture, etc.).

In view of this success, many governments of developing countries want to develop a genuine public reading policy at national level.

Public libraries, public reading, national policies, developing countries, Africa, rural aera, Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, CLAC, Francophonie

AN APPROACH BASED ON TWENTY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

In spite of the rapid development of information and communication technology, books will continue to play a decisive role in the transmission and diffusion of knowledge. Access to printed materials and enhancement of reading skills are key factors of social integration and citizenship, more so because social, political and economic life is governed by print. In this sense, the ownership of the print-based tradition is fundamental. In addition, access to books has become a key element of the rule of democracy. However, in francophone developing countries, books are scarce and not often within the reach of everyone.

Until the early 1980s, public reading was promoted exclusively in important towns and cities thanks to the determined assistance of French cooperation. In rural areas, the rare activities that were implemented in public reading were addressed principally to school libraries in a few important institutions.

The setting up of networks of Reading and Cultural Activity Centres by the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie since 1986 was precisely to redress the situation as regards the almost total absence of infrastructural facilities in rural areas. The first two networks were launched in Benin. Subsequently, two others were been set up in the regions of Thiès and Kolda of Sénégal.

CREATED IN	COUNTRY	NUMBER OF CENTRES
1986	Benin	20
1988	Senegal	16
1989	Burkina Faso	17
1990	Ivory Coast	10
1991	Niger	12
	Congo	10
1992	Rwanda	10
	Burundi	10
1993	Gabon	9
	Mauritius	15
1994	Comores	10
1996	Guinea	10
1997	Mauritania	10
	Togo	10
2000	Haïti	10
2001	Chad	10
2002	Lebanon	14
2002	Madagascar	10

With more than 200 centres operating in 17 countries, the programme “Reading and Cultural Activity Centres” constitutes the main public reading initiative managed and animated exclusively by a local staff and implemented outside urban centres.

Finally, the successful implementation of long term activities over such an extended period through this programme, which has constantly adjusted to changes within the context, remains a relatively rare phenomenon in the field cooperative activities.

DESCRIPTION

The programme “Reading and Cultural Activity Centres” operates as a network of public libraries where users meet and exchange a great deal. They are capable of responding to the needs 5 000 to 25 000 inhabitants of a town or village. In every country where the programme is implemented, the Centre hosts a lending library of 80 square metres and a room for cultural activities which is often larger.

Generally, the Centre is equipped with the following:

- A collection of 2 500 books suited for lending purposes, properly bound to resist extensive use and, often, extreme climatic conditions
- Local and international newspapers, journals and magazines
- More than fifty board games and educational tools
- Pedagogical kits including books and published works on teaching methods for teachers
- Audio and audio-visual materials including televisions, satellite receivers, audio and video-players/recorders

Each of the networked centres is constituted of around ten units spread over a given region, province or, sometimes, over a country. Networking for greater coherence also encourages greater dynamism through emulation and sharing.

The coordinator who is responsible for the network pays regular visits to the centres. His task is to ensure that the animator’s work is of high quality as required and that books and equipment, including projectors for open-air cinema, are made available as and when necessary to each of the centres.

METHOD, CONCEPT AND TOOLS

At the beginning, the way the “Reading and Cultural Activity Centres” operated was strongly inspired by the French and Canadian model of public reading. Gradually, the programme forged its own methodology and developed proper rules and regulations as well as common working tools for all centres which are being run independently in the country where they are hosted.

Although our approach is sometimes slightly academic, it is always inspired by the reality of the country where we operate and, consequently, remains extremely concrete. We are constantly preoccupied by how the activities of each centre can significantly impact upon our target population.

Self-financing is not conceivable. Public reading depends naturally on subsidies, whether from the State, from local government or through partnerships. In developing countries, more than anywhere else, financial resources are scarce and needs are multiple. In order to win the interest of political decision makers or funding agencies and convince them to invest in public reading, we are obliged to justify the investment by coming up with a unit-cost per user which is compatible with local resources.

The necessity to be outcome-oriented is a *sine qua non* for the development of public libraries in Francophone developing countries. But too often planners view as natural and as easy the establishment of libraries to promote reading in an environment which is totally deprived of books.

Contrary to expectations, the experience of OIF has shown that the setting up of libraries as a ongoing project is a difficult task, more so in a context characterised by the absence of print.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

The creation of “Reading and Cultural Activity Centre” networks is always demand-driven. It follows requests formally expressed by member-states, generally through the parent ministry for culture and, therefore, for public reading.

The responsibility for setting up any network lies with the ministry. To support the ministry, OIF furnishes the network with a start up by providing books and equipment and assisting technically in the training of local staff.

Once the network is established, the programme becomes entirely integrated into the cultural policy of the host country. A budgetary line is allocated and the salary of the technical cadres is taken care of.

In agreement with the State concerned and under certain conditions, the OIF annually contributes to the running costs of the networks, i.e expenditures concerning essentially local travelling costs of network coordinators, subscriptions to local newspapers, purchase of books published locally, organisation of socio-cultural activities and maintenance of audiovisual equipment.

Each locality that hosts a “Reading and Cultural Activity Centre” constitutes a management committee comprising representatives of its various sectors of activity (administrative authorities, associations, teachers etc). The function of the committee is to supervise the overall administrative and management aspects of the centre.

The locality is expected to provide the adequate space facility required, to take care of its maintenance and day-to-day house keeping (electricity and guard...). It is also responsible for the designation of two voluntary animators to support the permanently appointed animator whose salary is met either by the locality or the ministry, depending on the host country. Their task is to define collectively the main activities of the centre.

THE NEED FOR CAREFUL SELECTION OF CULTURAL GOODS

Published works are very carefully selected to constitute the stock of the centre. With the exception of reference books or classics, each stock of publications is specific to the country, or even the region.

The selection procedures are based on a number of criteria related to the geographical or historical context of the host country, the profiles of potential users and the needs expressed. Priority consideration is given to locally published books in French or in national languages.

These books are suitable to the need of potential readers, often very well illustrated and easy to read, especially those aimed at young readers, i.e. 60% of the readership.

Prior to their circulation in the networks, all books are properly bound by specialists for extensive lending purposes. Accordingly, the cost per unit is doubled but the book's life expectancy is multiplied by ten.

On the basis of our long experience in this area, the Francophonie has adopted a rigorous policy which prioritizes the purchase of books which are new and of high quality. This major advantage is an absolutely necessary component of the system to attract and retain users.

In distinction from the common belief of some, the lack of books in developing countries does not justify massive dumping of unused books or the weeding of collections in the libraries of rich countries.

If books do not respond to the needs of potential users, even with packed shelves, libraries are condemned to remain empty. However, one has to understand that for a non professional in this field, the failure of a library is not explained by the quality of its book collection; rather it reinforces the erroneous cliché that " books are of no interest in countries with an oral tradition".

THE NEED FOR CONSTANT ADAPTATION TO THE CONTEXT

With a few exceptions, there exists no professional training programme in the field of public reading in Francophone developing countries. Competencies required are scarce even in urban areas; they are practically non-existent in rural areas.

As a result, all services for which a specific technical expertise is required are centralised at the level of the parent ministry, and, more rarely, at the OIF. Everything is being done to support the animators of "Reading and Cultural Activity Centres" in providing the services required of them for the public and the organisation of cultural activities.

The organisation of cultural activities represents an essential component of the programme. These activities include the organisation of competitions, film shows, conferences and other public shows. They are essential for the centre to fully assume its social development role. In order to develop concrete ownership by the locality, they are open to the entire population, including the illiterates. If this were not the case, the centres would be seen as the exclusive privilege of the school populations and the elite society, especially in regions where the literacy rate and school enrolment are not very high.

Cultural activities and indoor games which are current features of the libraries of all centres also prevent them from being seen as an extension of schools; they contribute to the perception of reading as a popular activity. This moreover explains why those who are responsible for running the libraries are called "animators" rather than "library officers".

In order to target a wide population in regions often underprivileged, the "Reading and Cultural Activity Centres" have become a powerful tool at the service of development agencies, principally in the health sector. The PNUD, UNICEF, FNUAP and FAO, among others, regularly benefit from the services offered by the centres in a number of countries. In terms of child vaccination, struggle against circumcision, early pregnancy and also sexually communicable diseases, the collaboration has been very fruitful.

CONCRETE AND MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

The collection of statistical data on attendance rates is an essential tool for a sound management of the “Reading and Cultural Activity Centres”. The animators collect all the necessary information on the day-to-day operations of each of the centres. Data compiled every month are then sent to the management committee of the locality, as well as to the parent ministry.

The data are checked and validated by the coordinator during his monthly visit as well as during the annual evaluation visit conducted jointly by the parent ministry and the OIF.

On the basis of the number of subscribers and the number of books on loan the performance of centres belonging to the same network can be compared. However, the results obtained have to be moderated in the light of various factors related to the physical environment or the cultural context in which the centres are anchored.

Obviously, the size of the locality is a major determining factor. In Senegal, for example, the population of the localities where “Reading and Cultural Activity Centres” have been set up is generally below 6 000 inhabitants while in Togo it is often above 20 000.

The absence of electricity in the homes directly influences the reading habits of subscribers. In Chad and Guinea, for example, the number of loaned books is relatively low compared to the number of readers who prefer to read in centres equipped with solar energy light.

If school enrolment and literacy rates vary from one country to another, they can also be two or three times more important in one region of the same country compared to another. Within the same region the difference from one village to another can also be very significant. Consequently, it is preferable to refer to indicators related to the school population in order to establish any comparison and determine the objectives to be reached in terms of subscription or attendance.

Moreover, the languages of instruction have to be congruent with those in which books and other publications are available in the centres. In Madagascar and Haiti, for example, the national languages (malagassy and creole) are used as the medium of instruction in primary education. Books, cartoons and illustrated short stories in these languages are in high demand. Similarly, the availability of book collections in English in Mauritius, or in Arab in Lebanon and Mauritania, has contributed noticeably to increased subscription and attendance.

From our experience, it can be said that attitudes of potential readers towards books and reading libraries are determined by the cultural context only during the start up phase of the setting up of libraries. Following a period of adaptation during which the animators implement context-specific strategies, differences between countries decrease significantly and indicators regarding subscription rates and attendance become almost comparable. In some African countries, for example, young girls have been authorised to attend the centres only after the sensitisation and awareness campaign conducted by animators and members of the management committee. The campaign was aimed specifically at parents. It is presumed that less than a year is required to establish long term gender parity as regards attendance.

On the basis of assessing this attitudinal constant about books and reading, independent of the country concerned, the programme’s target is to register at least 25% of the school

population of any locality to the services provided by the libraries of the centres. It is an achievable objective given that the average percentage of all the networks is above 40%. This includes 22% of subscribers who are over 18 years of age.

Visits, subscriptions and book loans: statistics compiled in 2005 from data collected for three years (2002, 2003, 2004).

Country (10 centres)	Annual visits	Annual subscribers	Annual loans of books
Bénin (Mono)	124.578	8046	60.660
Bénin (Atacora)	168.838	7.822	33.170
Burkina Faso (Est)	121.593	8.260	72.589
Burkina Faso (Ouest)	131.126	4.864	58.954
Burundi	109.500	6449	24.060
Comores	82.569	6.284	32.736
Ivory Coast	168.745	8.885	71.237
Gabon	151.996	21.074	89.270
Guinea	255.315	17.737	60.750
Haïti	145.898	5.979	72.895
Lebanon	186.198	10.086	47.036
Madagascar	188.052	7.360	74.475
Mauritius	102.665	5.147	104.714
Mauritania	95.562	5.765	11.889
Niger	141.976	7.888	80.406
Sénégal (Kolda)	94.248	6.240	31.999
Sénégal (Thiès)	107.172	4.814	14.918
Chad	164.400	11.039	66.189
Togo	346.731	15.534	96.899
TOTAL	2.887.162	169.273	1.109606
AVERAGE	151.955	8.909	58.400

NB : *Transmission of statistics for Rwanda and Congo has been temporarily suspended*

Data on cultural activities are regularly collected. The information provided below is related only to conferences, film projections or public shows organised in the cultural activity hall next to the reading room.

Country (10 centres)	EVENTS PER ANNUM	Audience per annum
Bénin (Mono)	1.546	65.541
Bénin (Atacora)	2.745	109.894
Burkina (Est)	1.399	73.568
Burundi	1.875	99.577
Burkina (Ouest)	1.253	58.102
Comores	333	16.470
Ivory Coast	1 353	60 912
Gabon	1.569	99.150
Guinea	4.097	190.153
Haïti	1.186	109.932
Lebanon	1.322	32.055
Madagascar	1.772	122.990
Mauritius	1.695	27.624
Mauritania (2002)	1.273	33.606
Niger	1.436	194.290
Sénégal (Kolda)	1.504	56.565
Sénégal (Thiès)	1.155	47.739
Chad	1.445	184.899
Togo	1.831	111.285
TOTAL	30.749	1.584.420
AVERAGE	1618	83.390

SUPPORT IN FAVOUR OF NATIONAL POLICIES ON PUBLIC READING

The programme on “Reading and Cultural Activity Centres” has shown that it is possible to set up successfully proper structures for public reading even outside large urban centres in countries of the Southern Hemisphere.

However, despite the satisfactory results yielded by the programme in terms of user attendance and services provided, we have to admit that until recently, it had not resulted in the beneficiary countries establishing of real networks of public reading throughout their territory.

As a result of this evidence, the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) had to work out a specific programme to support countries willing to come up with a national policy framework in view of promoting public reading.

The development model proposed to these countries is drawn largely from the concept, methodology and know-how provided by the programme “Reading and Cultural Activity Centres”. This model has also emerged from the various working sessions held with the main funding agencies, namely the World Bank and the European Union. They unanimously agree to financially support the setting up of libraries in any country as long as public reading is clearly expressed as one of country’s priorities and the parent ministry has the technical capacity to realize the project.

This is where the main purpose of the support provided by the OIF programme lies. The agency aims to ensure that interested countries put in place a legal framework on the integration of public reading in their cultural policies and on the setting up of a national centre dedicated specifically to the implementation of such policies. Headed by a senior officer from the judiciary and endowed with the budget required to meet its running costs, the centre as an expression of the political will of governments becomes a natural platform of exchange for financial and technical partners.

Since the programme was launched in 2003, four countries benefitting from the support of OIF, have already come up with a legal framework and have set in place an appropriate implementation mechanism: Mauritania in 2003, Burkina Faso in 2004, Haiti and Madagascar in 2005. Burundi, Rwanda and Mauritius will be the next beneficiaries.

An inventory of the operations of public libraries in each of these countries as well as an evaluation of their impact has first and foremost been carried out in order to forward a properly documented request for support to technical ministries and potential funding agencies in the near future.

The next step for OIF is to accompany the parent ministry of these countries by formally informing them about the challenges concerning the implementation of national networks of public libraries. This sensitization and advocacy work is carried out with ministries directly involved in the project (education, rural development, economy and planning) and with technical and financial partners (UN system, European Union, World Bank, bilateral cooperation...).

Following these consultative meetings, each State concerned will have to determine the nature of the legal framework and status of the organisational structure: a directorate within the Ministry of Culture as in Mauritania and Haiti or a State organisation as in Burkina Faso and Madagascar.

Essentially, OIF intervenes at the level of planning, infrastructure development and equipment of national centres, book selection and constitution of samples of book collections, training of staffs to be employed by the national centres in selecting and book treating and binding for extensive use.