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The challenge of public library systems to meet information needs for diverse multi-cultural communities: a case of mobile library service in Kenya

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Abstract:

The paper sets out with a background information and explains the contextual situation for adaptation of mobile service in the public library system in Kenya. It also presents the status quo and synchronizes the cross-types of mobile service that KNLS provides.

The paper collates the mobile library bookstock with users needs and levels and makes deductions. The challenges that face the service providers are enlisted and possible remedies suggested on how to transform the said challenges into opportunities for improvement of the service. The paper concludes with a brief analysis on the way forward.

1.0 Introduction

Kenya is located on the Eastern part of Africa, on the seaboard of the Indian Ocean. The Equator runs across the country. The country's total size is 580,367 sq. km, with a population of approximately 27 million people.

1.1 Kenya National Library Service

Kenya National Library Service Board (KNLS) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1969. KNLS performs a dual role of both National Library and Public Library. To date KNLS has a network of 28 branch libraries broken down as follows:

- 7 provincial libraries
- 8 district libraries
- 13 community based libraries
 - 8 bookmobile service
 - 1 motorbike/bookbox service
 - 2 camel mobile service

1.2 Mobile Library Service

Out of the 28 branch service, KNLS operates three cross types of mobile libraries as mentioned above to the public.

1.2.1 Rationale for Mobile Service

The concept of mobile library service in Kenya was conceived and implemented alongside the establishment of static library services in the country in the 1970s. This arose from the realization that there were few branch services and their envisaged growth could be slow, and dependent on donor funding. The mobile library was therefore introduced to bridge the gap between branch service and the inconvenienced users in distant areas, particularly in the rural countryside. The services were also generally planned for small population between 1970s and late 1980s. But overall the reasons for providing the mobile service among other factors may be summarized as follows:

- There exists in the country temporary settlements and ‘mobile’ populations of nomadic communities that the library service targets. Hence adaptation of innovative mobile services to the pastoral communities by means of the camel as a mode of delivery;
- Some users in remote areas are too few to justify existence of a branch service, yet they are ‘a source of concern for library services’;
- Accessibility to target groups located in areas with poorly developed road network infrastructure, coupled with lack of transport makes it difficult for users to reach libraries;
- It may take a long time before funds are available to establish branch service in needy areas of the country, and the mobile service is seen as an interim measure to bridge the gap;
- The mobile service sometimes is used to gauge the readership levels to justify future development of branch service;
- Lack of existence of alternative sources of information in far away areas from the branch service, etc.

The above situation has worsened with the government’s policy shift to focus on poverty reduction strategies, good governance or creation of democratic institutions that are accountable to

people against a slow national economic growth. This situation has denied library authorities the necessary funding to provide effective and efficient library services. But, it should be borne in mind that capital alone cannot turn around the economy without information playing a ‘catalytic’ role in the change process. Therefore, the library’s efforts to empower people with information, i.e. building social capital and combat their social exclusion cannot be over emphasized. Accessing information to people in whatever format either in electronic and digital and print formats will certainly play a very central role in the development process and spur economic growth at community and national levels.

1.2 Goal

The overall goal of the mobile library service is:

To extend library branch services for the enrichment of inconvenienced user communities in both rural and urban areas.

1.3 Objectives

To achieve the above goal the mobile service has the following objectives:

- Promote literacy and reading recovery programs in rural areas;
- Support sustainable independent and lifelong learning;
- Supplement formal and informal education;
- Promote awareness of the role of the library in society;
- Build on innovative ways to access information to disadvantaged groups of society;
- Provide professional advice to institutions and promote best practices in managing small resource centres and/or school libraries.

1.4 Mobile Library Service and its Clientele

Kenya is a multi-racial country with more than 30 ethnic groups¹ that are distributed throughout the country. The pattern of settlement is dictated by the potential of arable lands and other social economic activities in both rural and urban areas. These communities have intermarried amongst themselves and live harmoniously. The two unifying languages for the communities are Swahili and English.

In terms of information needs, these groups have varied needs and use information for different purposes. The information that is available in the library service is in various formats. However, this paper endeavours to discuss and confine itself to provision of mobile library service as indicated earlier from the goal above. To this end, suffice to say that KNLS provides different cross types² of mobile service to the public.

These are; bookmobiles, motorbike and/or bookbox and non-motorized mobile service throughout the country. The clients of these service also vary according to user levels and each mobile type targets the groups separately as explained below.

1.4.1 Bookmobile Service

KNLS has eight bookmobiles operating from eight branch libraries. The service is the oldest service which was started in early 1970s. During the first ten years, the service covered a large area because the vehicles were new and serving a relatively smaller population than now. The service mainly target secondary students, farmers, health and social workers in rural areas, and

other readers in various professions. Overtime, the service has reduced its catchment area, owing to age and cost of operating the vehicles. At the moment, the vehicles require intensive rehabilitation to ensure effective service and cost containment. And as a long term measure the vehicles require replacement since the service is popular with readers throughout the country.

1.4.2 Motorbike and/or Book Box Service

Unlike the bookmobile, the bookbox service is purely a community initiative that brings together schools within a region called Mathira in Central Kenya.

Individual primary schools contribute funds to purchase books from prescribed lists. The lists are compiled by the branch library in collaboration with respective teachers. Each list is different from the other for all schools.

The books are acquired, processed and managed by the library. The books are loaned to participating schools a bookbox each for a month. The materials are packed in boxes and transported to and from the library to schools by a motorbike. At the end of the loan period, the books are collected by the ‘teacher librarians’ and returned to the library for sorting and repackaging, and forwarding to the next schools.

It is evident that through the program, pupils can access variety of books which hitherto were lacking in schools. The service has helped improve performance in languages (English and Swahili) and in national exams. Teachers too are able to access supplementary teaching and reference materials.

The program is cost effective due to bulk purchasing. It has also promoted utilization of community resources through resource sharing for mutual benefit – education achievement

The above initiative is a manifestation of the branch library’s promotion of the role of a library in learning institutions. Further, it was not easy for the pupils in that region to access directly the services available at the static library. Despite book losses and mutilation due to heavy usage, the service has met its objectives. And, replacement of lost books has not posed any major challenges since schools are compliant to the requirements, as set out in the rules and regulations of the service.

1.4.3 Camel Library Service (CLS)

Extending library service by non-motorized mobile service is a concept of KNLS. The service is confined to the Northern parts of Kenya, where it targets a nomadic pastoral community. Since its inception the service has attracted a lot of interest and support from individuals, agencies and IFLA Round Table on Mobile Libraries. The current concerns of the service are mainly focussed on the quality of the service and information formats available to meet the user community’s needs. To this end, KNLS is gradually adopting the mobile library standards as may be applicable and finally incorporate the International Guidelines on Mobile Library Programme by IFLA, that seeks to assess different types of non-motorized library service in regions around the world and the impact of such libraries on users and society.³

The Camel Library Service is actively “extending library service to a dominatedly Muslim community in Northeastern Kenya that are inaccessible by motorized vehicles or mechanisms. At the same time, the CLS services easily accommodate community involvement and support planning, maintenance, and expansion of services”.⁴

The community is fundamentally a nomadic pastoral community, whose major economic activities are livestock keeping and simple and unreliable agricultural activities⁵. The region measure 126,186 sq. km and is approximately 22% of Kenya's total land. The region is one of the least developed in the country. It has a population of 962,143 inhabitants.

The CLS was initially adapted as an interim measure to meet information needs of a community that was for a long time considered as 'hard-to-access.' This is due to the community's cultural lifestyle. The community could not benefit much from the branch service at Garissa due to long distances from their homes. The rugged terrain, underdeveloped communication infrastructure and incompatible lifestyle of the pastoralists compounded the problem. However, with the CLS the community can now access the library service provided to them. The service mainly targets nomadic schools, manyattas (villages) and other administrative centres. The service also supports literacy programs like adult education and is a source of recreation.

The Camel Library Service is appreciated by the served population in Garissa. The community is indeed involved in planning for the service as an outlet to access information to them. The service is operationally feasible and compatible with the nomadic pastoral lifestyle.⁶

1.5 Mobile Library Stock

As indicated earlier, the bookmobile service targets adult users and normally its stock constitutes 50-60% of the total adult stock at the branch service. The scenario differs from the motorbike/bookbox service, whose bookstock strength is reliant on the enrolment strength of schools that participate in the program through their contributions and donations from KNLS and other agencies. For camel library service, the service has attracted isolated piecemeal funding and book donations from various agencies because of its uniqueness and purpose. Overall, the quality and format of information available in the mobile service is 'information published in more traditional formats, such as books or magazines'⁷ which are accessible to diverse urban and rural communities. In a countrywide survey of the public library service in Kenya (June-December 2000)⁸ KNLS identified new demands for adult books in rural areas for the mobile service. These areas included, Guidance and counselling, Social psychology, institutional management, religious literature, community health, family education and complimentary course books to supplement formal and informal learning.

Due to high prevalence of poverty levels, rising unemployment, school dropouts, youths in rural areas have been left to fend on their own. This has resulted into disintegration of social values and more and more people indulge in anti-social behaviour. These include, drug addiction, sexual abuse leading to transmission of HIV/AIDS, peer influence, etc. Indeed institutions and families more than ever are under pressure to contain this deviant social behavior. Hence the demand for materials in counselling and physiology by school heads, church leaders, social workers and others with a direct bearing on society's disintegration of its social values due to cross-cultural influences and other ideals.

1.6 New Service to the Served Population

The new service recently introduced in the mobile include:

1.6.1 Service to the Deaf. Service to disadvantaged members of the community, the deaf in learning institutions has been started. It is easy to provide the service to the group since they use the normal printed materials unlike braille for the Visually Impaired Persons (VIPs).

1.6.2 Civic Education

Civic Education materials and training on the constitutional review are accessed to users. The materials are distributed and delivered to all service points by mobile service. The civic education materials by the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC) and others by the National Council Executive Committee of Civil Society, an initiative by churches and interested members engaged in the processes and activities for democratic reforms are provided.

1.6.3 Professional Advise for Teachers and School Librarians

It is evident in Kenya that “where school libraries exist, they are almost always run by a teacher, usually from the English teaching staff who gets no additional pay for work and is expected to undertake all the normal teaching lessons”.⁹ Using the mobile service as a mode of transport, teachers and school librarians are being trained in various aspects of managing small school libraries. They are prepared and/or equipped with necessary skills to run a school library at short sessions during the mobile visits.

In the past, the ministry of education had been managing a noble book project for schools sponsored by DFID (UK) and the Dutch government at a bilateral level with little success. Schools participate in the selection of materials required, but more often than not, class texts dominate the packages. There is little consideration for complimentary and reference materials. Records of materials purchased are normally not traceable and losses abound.

KNLS has undertaken to train such ‘teacher librarians’ and other staff at short sessions during mobile visits. The training content has a lot of practical skills, consultations and limited theory. As a follow up, teachers and staff are encouraged to go for practical attachments at the nearest static branch libraries during school holidays to improve on their new skills.

1.7 Administration of Mobile Service

1.7.1 Staffing

A minimum of two staff library assistants are on the book mobile during all service hours and one staff remains at the library to manage records, prepare reminders for over due books, organize materials on the shelves, etc.

Professional duties for mobile staff are the same as staff in other departments with similar responsibilities.

1.7.2 Mobile Stops/Service Points

The mobile schedule is designed on the basis of population settlement patterns and convenience of users. Some stops are located at natural focal points as the case is for the nomadic pastoralists served by the Camel Library Service. Other stops include schools and administrative centres where both employees, business people and other social activities are undertaken. Application for new stops is analyzed by the librarian incharge of the branch service, and factors such as convenience from stop-to-stop, time, etc to ensure continuity of the service are considered.

1.7.3 Evaluation of Service

Performance of the mobile service is mainly obtained through analysis of statistics and discussions with staff at short sessions, as part of regular staff meetings of the branch service. However, detailed performance indicators are being formulated to ascertain effectiveness of the service, regarding the attainment of its goals and objectives, something which hitherto had been ignored.

1.7.4 Marketing Mobile Services

The marketing of mobile service begins with ensuring that the service is consistently provided and users (both actual and potential) can easily identify themselves with the service. But the overall marketing/publicity programme for KNLS incorporates promotion of mobile and other library services through mass media (newspaper supplements, TV, Radio, Video documentary, brochures, caps, banners, T-shirts or jersey etc), encouragement of community participation especially in the case of Camel Library Service. Other strategies include, book fairs, exhibitions and shows.

1.8 Challenges and Opportunities of Managing Mobile Library Service

“Managing mobile library service is increasingly becoming more challenging at a time when prices are high for vehicles and maintenance..... when the trend toward branch services replacing the mobile is becoming more of an issue”¹⁰. In Kenya, the major challenges that face the mobile library service include:

- 1.8.1 **Funding** – cost of operation and maintenance of bookmobiles, is beyond the budgetary allocations by the government. Funds for re-stocking the libraries regularly and attract more readers are not adequate.
- 1.8.2 **Frequency** – for the mobile service to remain meaningful and attractive to users, the mobile must be consistent, frequent and reliable. Occasionally the frequency of mobile library service in the country is not consistent and needs improvement.
- 1.8.3 **Partnerships** – Due to inadequate funding, the mobile service has not attracted adequate ‘separate’ funding to support its services. The service should seek more of community involvement and support in planning, and seek partnership in specific programs (e.g. reading recovery/literacy groups, service to nomadic communities) to open up for collaborative funding from NGOs and other social service agencies with similar interests in the sub-sector.

1.9 WAY FORWARD

The future of mobile service in Kenya will continue to remain central in advancing library services to communities that are multi-cultural countrywide. While it is possible to rehabilitate the existing bookmobiles, it will be commendable if replacements and/or new vehicles were acquired at a phased approach of say five-year period. For the innovative mobile service, it has proved to be viable and communities should be encouraged to collaborate with branch service managers to help users meet challenges of the user communities.

Overall, mobile service will continue to occupy a central role in “expanding our traditional services to meet changing community needs”.

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