

# Giving Them What They Want and Assessing Impact: Case Studies of Public Library Services in the Western Cape, South Africa

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## Abstract

*This paper focuses on the principles proposed in the “Library and Information Services Transformation Charter”, exploring the extent to which two public/community libraries in the Western Cape Province of South Africa are already engaged in charter activities. Interviews were conducted with directors of the library services who identified libraries where examples of good practice were already in evidence. Two sites were thereafter selected as case studies out of a total of 98 libraries in the City of Cape Town Library and Information Service, and the nature of the charter-oriented services being provided there described. The paper concludes with an attempt to show how data may be collected to make a case for the impact of library services as part of an advocacy strategy and to secure recognition of the validity of claims by public and community libraries for partnership in national development efforts.*

## Keywords

Library and information services, Public libraries, Impact assessment, Information Services Charter, South Africa.

## Introduction

South African public libraries suffered a period of

decline after independence in 1994, because of declining government funding and a lack of appreciation by politicians of the importance of the sector (Public Libraries in Africa, 2000). It is arguable that the low visibility of the public library was a legacy of the apartheid years during which time political and ideological neutrality constituted the professional orthodoxy of librarians and the eschewal of social and ethical issues, the usual vectors of transformation and development. In 1998, four years after the democratic dispensation, the professional organisation, Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), submitted a memorandum detailing the then parlous situation of libraries to the responsible Portfolio Committee of Parliament (Lor, 1998), reflecting the concern expressed by librarians and in the press about the rate of deterioration of services of the public library system which could be traced back to 1828, and which is considered to be the strongest in Africa (Public libraries in Africa, 2000). It is, however, a system characterised by “areas of neglect and pockets of excellence” (Lor, Van Helden and Bothma, 2005: 272).

In 2000, an inventory of public/community libraries was commissioned, resulting in the Public and Community Libraries Inventory of South Africa (PaCLISA) funded in part by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and designed as a planning tool to show “what public and library service points were in existence and where (Lor et al., 2005: 269). In a part of the project, the researchers attempted to develop a common set of basic measures and indicators for public libraries (De Jager and Nassimbeni, 2005), but the initiative to launch national data collection ended in failure as public libraries were at that stage unable or unwilling to engage in counting and measuring what they were doing (and not doing).

In 2007, the South African government demonstrated its faith in public libraries, when the

then Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan, invested an extra one million Rand in the public library sector in the form of conditional grants in order to achieve their transformation. The project has been completed, and a further 1.6 billion Rand has been allocated for the expansion of library services particularly in previously disadvantaged areas (Budget vote speech by the Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr MJ Phaahla, to the National Assembly, 2011). The following were some of the activities that were expressly stipulated for spending the grant:

- Build more libraries and upgrade library buildings;
- Buy, equip and deliver mobile libraries and container libraries in remote areas;
- Appoint more staff and extend opening hours;
- Expand and improve ICT connectivity;
- Develop and implement a new provincial ICT system;
- Upgrade security and improve library assets; and
- Buy more library materials and stock more books in indigenous languages (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: vii).

During the implementation of this project, it became apparent that the whole of the LIS sector was in a parlous situation requiring serious attention. The National Council of Library and Information Services, the statutory body that advises the Ministers of Arts and Culture, and of Education, therefore addressed the issue by appointing a Technical Team to draft a Library and Information Services Charter for South Africa. Their assignment was that the Charter had to:

- ‘Define the challenges facing the sector; and
- Provide a clear framework of principles and mechanisms for effecting the changes needed by the sector to contribute to the elimination of illiteracy, the eradication of inequality in the LIS sector, the promotion of social cohesion, and building of an informed and reading nation’ (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: vii; LIS Transformation Charter, Community Libraries

Grant, Indigenous language development by provinces: Department of Arts and Culture briefings, 2011).

The Technical Team, headed by Professor Muxe Nkondo, Chair of the Board of the National Library of South Africa, accepted that the ‘overarching social goal of LIS is to build the human, intellectual and social capital crucial to the kind of knowledge society to which South Africa aspires’ (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: xviii). Its method of work was very inclusive with consultative workshops in each of the nine provinces designed to give LIS professionals and the public opportunities for contributing ideas and information. The resultant document combining participants’ inputs and comments contains twelve chapters in a framework designed to guide librarians on how to enhance the public value of libraries and the efficiency and effectiveness of their services (LIS Transformation Charter, Community Libraries Grant, Indigenous language development by provinces: Department of Arts and Culture briefings, 2011).

An early draft was presented at a national summit in Pretoria in December 2008 following which participants’ comments and inputs were incorporated in successive drafts. The current version is the 6th draft – this is the draft that was presented to and accepted by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Arts and Culture. It was presented to the provincial Members of the Executive Council with responsibility for libraries and information services in their provinces before submission to the Portfolio Committee of Parliament in May 2010, the step before the final phase of ratification which will be at cabinet level. Once this has been accomplished, the Charter will become law and public libraries will need to comply with its recommendations.

The Charter expressed concern about the deleterious effects of a clause in the South African Constitution (Part A of Schedule 5) impacting on the provision of public library services. This clause stipulates that public library services are the special competence of the provinces. This provision has proved problematic deviating as it does from past practice where the responsibility was shared between local and provincial governments. In the previous dispensation, the provinces supplied professional and

technical services, such as acquisitions and cataloguing, and local authorities were responsible for hiring staff, paying their salaries and providing and maintaining buildings (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: 17). Under the new Constitution, this anomaly has given rise to many municipalities regarding library provision as an unfunded mandate, and has led to a decline in spending on libraries (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: 17). It is hoped that future legislation will mitigate this situation and make provision for provinces to assign funds specifically for libraries to local authorities.

The Charter also stressed the need to develop performance indicators for each of the LIS sub-sectors and so proceed to the establishment of national benchmarks. Very little has yet been done in the public library sector on measurement and impact, and it is proposed that a document such as the evidence-based Standards and Guidelines for Australian Public Libraries (2011) could be used as an example, providing public library services with external benchmarks for their activities.

One of the chapters of the Charter dealt with public libraries, highlighting the need to design suitable mechanisms to realise the goals of community building and countering social exclusion through activities such as enhancing literacy and education, by promoting community information and providing access to ICTs and related skills. The Charter specifically recommends that public libraries demonstrate the extent to which service objectives impact on individuals, communities and the environment. It is recognised that performance indicators have still to be established and notes that '[s]tatistics being currently collected can be used for this purpose. Norms and standards will be developed, against which reporting can be done' (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009:27). Informants repeatedly confirmed that the development of (as yet non-existent) country-wide norms and standards would be most useful for purposes of internal and external benchmarking and reporting to governing bodies. This paper does not, however, attempt to propose any such standards or benchmarks, but will suggest an initial approach to guide the selection of objectives which could begin to demonstrate the impact of library services that

are based on empirical evidence gathered in two case studies, and thus linking them to the guiding principles of the Charter and demonstrating feasibility.

The extent to which even basic statistics are currently collected in South African public libraries varies from province to province and the national system of statistical data collection initiated by the National Library of South Africa in 2005 and reported in earlier work (De Jager and Nassimbeni, 2005:43) has not succeeded. It is hoped that data collection will become routine as the Charter is accepted and implemented nationally. Basic statistical measures of input and output, however, are not sufficient for impact evaluation. As was recommended in the earlier work, such measures 'give only the bare outline of what is happening at particular institutions and clearly they are not enough ... They cannot give all the details and they certainly do not give any reasons why things are as they are' (De Jager & Nassimbeni, 2005:43).

## Methodology

As this was an exploratory study, it was decided to focus on public library services in the Western Cape and to explore their reactions to the Charter and their perceptions of the most serious obstacles to realising the Transformation Charter's vision of the public library as a 'community information and cultural hub' (2009: 20). In the first instance a series of interviews was planned with public library service directors or their representatives as informed experts, in order to understand to what extent they shared the vision of what the Charter terms 'the new model of responsive service' and public libraries' 'dynamic role as change agents' (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: 20).

Interviews were therefore arranged with a representative of the Director of Library and Information Services of the City of Cape Town, as well as with the Director and Deputy Director of the Western Cape Provincial Library Service. Having considered the policy dimension and its fit with the Charter's vision, the researchers followed up by gathering concrete evidence from two deliberately identified sites (out of a total of 98) to provide exemplars of practice. The selection of the two libraries for on-site visits was guided by respondents in the first phase of the investigation, who specifically

recommended these two sites. They are Library A, a library situated in a middle class suburb physically accessible to all residents of the suburb, but some 10km distant from an informal settlement also falling within its jurisdiction. The official South African department of statistics defines an informal settlement as: “an unplanned settlement on land which has not been surveyed or proclaimed as residential consisting mainly of informal dwellings (shacks)” (Statistics South Africa, 2004: 9). Library B is a community library in the centre of an informal settlement poorly served with public amenities. On ethical grounds, the two libraries were not identified by name as they had specifically requested this.

Interview questions were derived for the directors from the Charter, which had identified a set of practices that would reflect the developmental goals of the library. The Charter had identified some issues and the researchers wanted to explore how and to what extent all or some of them already were in place in the directors’ library systems:

- Promotion of reading and writing;
- Formal and informal education and learning;
- Community and other useful information provision, e.g. consumer information, health, employment opportunities;
- Democracy and citizenship;
- Fostering creativity and cultural expression;
- Social cohesion and the fostering of appreciation of cultural diversity;
- Access to and the mediation of ICTs; and
- Information literacy to allow citizens to participate in the knowledge society (2009: 20)

During the onsite visits, head librarians and other members of their staff were interviewed; and the community building activities that reflected the examples noted in the Charter were observed and documented.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Matching Visions: the Charter and Public Library Services**

The Director and Deputy Directors were to a considerable extent in agreement and they

expressed a positive view of the Transformation Charter, believing that it concretised their vision of public libraries and reaffirmed their goals and values. They thought that the Charter presented feasible objectives for the library services, at the same time acknowledging that a number of its suggestions have already been realised to some extent, or that they were engaged with processes that would do so.

The twin obstacles of underfunding and consequent staff shortages were the main problems noted by both library services. While public libraries remain an unfunded mandate, informants thought it was unlikely that the Transformation Charter vision would come to fruition. The conditional grants to public libraries had made a big difference, they acknowledged, but questions of sustainability have not been resolved. It was therefore essential to obtain funding and grant money from external sources, and to establish partnerships with businesses and charitable organisations in order to ensure additional resources. Without such extra money, libraries found it impossible to do much more beyond basically keeping the doors open and might even have little capacity to implement even the core programmes.

Under-funding results in staff shortages, which, it was thought, remained one of the biggest obstacles to preventing the realisation of the Charter vision. Staffing capacity problems were of two kinds and manifested not only as too few actual staff members, but also in the selection and retention of suitable staff who should have an understanding of political processes and be able to engage meaningfully with politicians. Informants noted how difficult it was to find and appoint appropriate and capable people with good communication skills, who were knowledgeable and interested in books and reading, and who had adequate computer skills.

Several times, it was noted that funding issues were exacerbated because libraries are not viewed as an important priority by politicians and City councillors who do not necessarily understand the many roles that public libraries can play in a community. They often are not library users themselves and do not think of libraries as useful facilities, hence are unwilling to fund them adequately. Unfortunately, libraries in the main have not yet embraced the importance of objectively demonstrating their value and librarians themselves might lack the tools to do so. In this paper, the

researchers will attempt to provide some initial guidelines for impact assessment and its use in advocating the role and function of public libraries to politicians and funders.

### **Overview of Some Activities that Implement the Charter**

The interviews with library directors were followed by visits to Library A and Library B that they had identified as sites of good practice, where it was possible to see some of the services in action. The researchers' observations, which are detailed below, are enhanced by details from discussions with the directors, and will be mapped to the activities identified by the Charter.

These are generally regarded as core public library activities. For instance, the Australian Standards and Guidelines G14 (p.40 ) stated core public library activities to be providing a welcoming, trusted place where those seeking to improve their literacy skills have opportunities to do so without fear of judgment or stigma, and providing resources and programmes which encourage and stimulate reading among all members of the community.

The informants noted, and librarians met during the site visits agreed, that especially younger people tended to read less than before. Both sites focused a lot of their attention on preschoolers and offered story times, lap reading sessions with parents and toddlers, and taking books to babies in crèches. Literacy interventions are still regarded as one of the biggest needs in many communities; in Library B, literacy projects and 'thinking skills' training were offered in response to expressed community needs where opinions were voiced that young people's reckless behaviour was encouraged by their lack of exposure to reflecting on consequences of choice and behaviour.

### **Formal and Informal Education and Learning**

At the time of the visit to Library B, a parenting programme in progress was observed. Mothers with toddlers were engaged in this informal activity which not only had a developmental intent with respect to parenting skills, but also had aimed to add growth in self confidence and empowerment by encouraging active participation in shaping their circumstances.

The mothers, for example, were taught how to share books and stories with their toddlers and also to network among themselves.

### **Community and Other Useful Information Provision**

Libraries from both services are involved in HIV/AIDS programmes through information provision; permanent exhibitions, links with clinics, distributing up-to-date pamphlets and by providing venues for testing sessions in libraries on World AIDS Day. Libraries have also been used by the City of Cape Town as venues and vehicles for the distribution of application forms and information about employment opportunities in the City Council. Participating librarians were of the opinion that such interventions are "very popular" and have a big impact on the public. When quizzed, however, they were unable to give any quantitative evidence of impact on employment status of participants.

During the visit to Library B, a two-week careers programme was in process, engaging young people from the surrounding community during their winter vacation. The librarians noted that careers programmes were particularly appealing to both teens and unemployed youths since their schools offered no useful information in this regard, and the programme offered a path to employment in a community where socio-economic ills of poverty and unemployment are prevalent.

### **Support for Democracy and Citizenship**

The Director and Deputy Director reported that polling stations are established in some libraries on the outskirts of the city on voting days. They also function as distribution points for information emanating from government departments. The researchers were informed about a monthly legal aid programme in a library where people may without charge consult a lawyer about their problems. Weekly programmes are also run about business opportunities. It was noted that not many public libraries work in this area, but a few have responded to identified needs in their community, recognising that the active participation of adults and teens in community programmes offered by the library to enhance life chances can serve as a vehicle for raising awareness of participants and giving them

confidence that they have a voice and can assert their rights. Acting in these ways, the library can become a focus for civic engagement.

### **Fostering Creativity and Cultural Expression**

A number of libraries have writing and poetry workshops for teens and young adults. In Library B, the art club meets on the last Saturday of the month. Each month, a new art form is explored, offering a creative experience to a group of teenagers. Exhibitions and outings are arranged and the library hosts art exhibitions by local artists.

### **Fostering Social Cohesion and Appreciation of Cultural Diversity**

Social cohesion is an elusive term with which public libraries the world over have been grappling in the last decade. Stilwell (2006: 3) notes that there has been scant attention to the exploration of the term “social exclusion” as it applies to libraries in South Africa, unlike in the UK which started to address the issue seriously in the late 1990s. The report on social exclusion in public libraries in the UK by Muddiman et al. (2000) has been very influential, leading many commentators to reflect on how library planning and practice might combat social exclusion, and promote social inclusion and social cohesion. Muddiman’s definition of social exclusion is a useful one:

... [it] relates not only to a lack of material resources, but also to matters like inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power (1999).

One group of individuals who might feel socially excluded are those who do not know what libraries can offer and how to use them. However, the default position of a voluntary approach to social inclusion must be replaced by the purposeful directing of resources to programmes specifically for targeted groups who are marginalised in the ways described above (Muddiman, et al. 2000). In both Library A and Library B, targeted programming for those on the margins was found; like people living in informal settlements who tend to be excluded from even local

authority services. Both libraries worked with youths in an effort to strengthen their schooling, and give them hope for the future allowing them to imagine and plan a socially and economically integrated life. Library A encouraged an appreciation of diversity by offering opportunities for meeting and socialising to members of different communities in a safe and attractive place where they could enjoy joint activities.

### **Access to and Mediation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)**

Public libraries in the Western Cape have had access to computers for some time through the ‘Smart Cape’ project, which initially rolled out six reconditioned computers with Internet access to six public libraries in disadvantaged areas. The project was so successful that it won the prestigious Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Award in 2003. A minimum of six computers are now available in all public libraries in the Western Cape and are a major draw card and cause of increase in public library use and membership. Some public libraries have since secured funding for extra computers. The recent installation of ADSL has made a major difference as response times had been very slow in the past.

According to the informants, the provision of ICTs is playing a major role in enhancing service delivery to rural areas and to bridge the digital divide. Conditional grant funding received from the National Department of Arts and Culture has expanded the roll-out of ICTs to 20 additional sites during 2009/10 and is receiving substantial support from communities: ‘Service delivery is being enhanced by these ICT projects and all libraries where these facilities had been installed report an increase in membership and use of libraries’ (Western Cape Province, 2010:41). Such projects would typically include computer literacy programmes, sessions on CV preparation and accessing job advertisements.

Informants noted that staff capacity problems have become particularly noticeable in connection with ICTs, as staff are spending more time teaching computer skills or finding volunteers to help them. Computer classes to retirees are in demand in some libraries and young people with computer skills are used as volunteers or ‘cyberscouts’ in some libraries to assist novice users. It was particularly noted that the areas around the computers in the libraries were

the busiest of all.

### **Information Literacy to Enable Citizens to Participate in the Knowledge Society**

Libraries teach information skills and conduct orientation sessions and class visits to local schools. Informants noted that politicians are particularly concerned with support for learning, especially with improving matric results and computer skills. The informal ad hoc assistance given to learners could provide the platform for a systematic programmatic approach to the provision of information literacy, a project that has already commenced in the Cape Town City Library and Information Services.

### **Key Features of the Activities in the Two Sites**

It was observed that both libraries were engaged with their communities and were constantly on the alert for opportunities to raise their visibility, for example, by hosting high profile personalities with the power to attract and engage the communities, to mark special events. They also made efforts to extend their reach by taking services outside the four walls. According to the informants, the library was seen in each community as a welcoming place, making available, for example, its space, facilities, materials or activities for social interactions and learning opportunities. These observations suggested to us that both Library A and Library B were engaged in the building of social capital although neither library theorised the role of the library as a public meeting place in these terms, an area of emerging research in the public library sector. Social capital is defined as involving social networks, trust and norms of reciprocity (Putnam, 1993), being built in democratic states by efficient public institutions and public policies, and also through voluntary associations and informal interaction (Stolle, 2003). Audunson, et al (2007) theorise that offering the library as a meeting place where people 'are exposed to values and interests different from those that create their core identity by having contact with diverse people' can build social capital '...[and that] they may be important in creating bridges between people with different values and belonging to different cultures' (2007).

The affordances of the development of social

capital by Library A and Library B were evident in the meetings and social interactions made possible by both libraries. The library was recognised as:

- A place for accidental meetings and conversations;
- A place where you can find information about other meeting places in the community;
- A public sphere where cultural and other ideas are presented in a formally constructed event;
- An arena where you can acquire information and knowledge allowing you to be an active citizen; and
- An arena for virtual meetings on the Internet.

Library B, recognising their powerlessness to change the Constitutional arrangements that were having a deleterious effect on funding for special projects to achieve the goals of social inclusion, took a decision to direct their future by raising their own funds. This change of mindset – the determination not to succumb to victimhood, but rather to focus on what can be done and changed – has gathered momentum and success in fundraising so that they have been able to expand their projects and spread their reach. Their success has been built on their ability to identify partners and to make and nurture relationships with other agencies to jointly deliver some of their objectives, like improving school performance.

### **Assessing and Demonstrating Impact**

Library impact assessment has become an increasing concern in the international arena in recent years, as the growing body of literature testifies (Markless and Streatfield, 2006:6). These authors note a number of factors supporting the trend towards the increasing demand for accountability in libraries, which include a "growing focus on performance management and accountability in public institutions," the "value for money ethos" and the move "towards evidence-based library and information work" (2006:6-8). Attempts at assessing library impact in these terms have employed different strategies such as social audits (Usherwood, 2002:117), return on investment (British Library, 2004), or contingent

evaluation (Hider, 2011). But as the discussion above indicated, South African public libraries have not yet demonstrated the ability, nor had data at their disposal to venture into these aspects of impact assessment. This paper does therefore not attempt to present an investigation into either the activities and outputs or the economic value of South African public libraries, but to provide guidelines for a qualitative approach to demonstrating public library value.

As early as 1973 Orr. had distinguished the two aspects of “library goodness” in the questions “how good is the service?” and “how much good does it do?” (1973: 317). Brophy noted in an eloquent discussion of qualitative approaches to providing evidence for library performance, that the first of Orr’s questions relate to measures and outputs of library activities, while the second focuses on “the effects the library has on its environment, and, crucially, on its users” (2008:7). In concluding this paper therefore, the intention is to suggest guidelines that may assist public librarians in demonstrating how much good the library does for its users in Orr’s terms – and in this case some of the users may be from the poor and deprived members of the South African society.

Also public libraries in South Africa urgently need to demonstrate to politicians and funders that library services can make a meaningful difference in the communities they serve. In the libraries that were visited for this paper, the researchers were very impressed by activities that were observed and that were indeed expressing the objectives of the Charter. It was, however, also noted that the librarians are not focused on collecting evidence of the difference that they make to their users and in their communities.

An important rationale for impact assessment may be found in demonstrating the difference that information and libraries can make to individuals and on society (Usherwood, 2002:118). Services that make a meaningful difference in peoples’ lives not only result in popular support for the service providers, but also demonstrable evidence of their impact, and in turn, provides politicians and policy makers with rationale for financial support (Johnson et al., 2004:33). It is therefore suggested that in addition to the routine collection of basic statistics, public libraries could also select one or two of their individual activities and systematically gather

evidence of their impact, selecting in particular those activities and programmes whose objectives are consonant with the areas identified by government for priority action, such as the provision of quality education, literacy, and social cohesion, as illustrated by the examples of Charter activities already in place.

### **Value and Impact**

In order to understand the difference between library value and impact, it is important to distinguish between value and impact of library services. Much research has been done in the problematic area of assessing value in a library or information service, first has to define value, an elusive concept informed by the disciplines of philosophy and of economics. Saracevic and Kantor (1997) provided a theoretical framework for an examination of value in LIS. Their definition of value is useful here, as it links value and impact:

We take it that value within some context describes a relation between an object or objects (be they tangible like products or intangible like ideas and information) and their worth, which may include merit, benefit, impact, quality, utility/usefulness, desirability, and/or cost. The cost may not be necessarily monetary in nature, it could be represented by time or effort ... the value of a library and information service is an assessment by users (or user surrogates) of the qualities of an interaction with the service and the worth or benefits of the results of the interaction, as related to the reasons for using the service (1997: 539).

Accepting that something is valuable therefore requires ‘recognition that value is dependent on value sets or systems’ (Town 2010), so that value is defined by what a recipient believes to be valuable. Town succinctly states that ‘value will mean different things to different people’ (2010). In order for something to be valuable, it also has to be something *important*; or significant, something that someone cares about. If something is regarded as trivial, it does not have much value.

In order to demonstrate value, therefore, it is obvious that evidence of value will only be accepted



when the same value system is shared. For public libraries to demonstrate the value of their activities to their governing bodies, for example, it will be necessary for them to focus not on what other librarians value, but on what the local government or the politicians value; on what they regard as important.

Once one has accepted that evidence of value is only available from someone who shares the same value system, evidence of the impact of an intervention or a service may be sought. Impact is making a recognisable difference in an area that has worth or that is regarded as valuable. Markless and Streatfield (2007) suggest that one can recognise impact in terms of change in the following dimensions:

- Behaviour (doing things differently);
- Competence (doing things better);
- Levels of knowledge; and
- Attitudes (e.g. confidence, valuing the LIS staff).

It would clearly be a difficult task for busy librarians to evaluate their impact on all these levels at any one time, but they could select one or two areas where they would like to demonstrate their own impact:

Effective impact evaluation involves careful focus on what is important and then gathering the minimum amount of evidence needed to tell you what you need to know ... evidence is not a separate category of information; it is information chosen by someone and gathered for a particular purpose (Markless and Streatfield, 2006:88).

It is therefore proposed that in addition to developing the activities noted by the Charter, public libraries should also pay attention to gathering qualitative evidence of the impact of these activities in order to be able to demonstrate to politicians and convince funders that public libraries indeed are valuable social assets that should be supported and funded accordingly.

### **Demonstrating Impact**

A basic requirement for impact assessment is to

focus on the mission or objectives of an organisation in order to demonstrate that objectives are being carried out or the mission being accomplished. In public libraries, these should typically be in line with the integrated development plans of their local authorities, and also the strategic goals of the province. The latest strategic plan of the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport of the Western Cape Provincial Government includes the following objectives:

- ‘Improving school education outcomes;
- Increasing social cohesion;
- Promoting rural development;
- Effective, efficient and responsible government; and
- Creating a nation of readers’ (Western Cape Province, Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, 2010: 53).

All of these outcomes embody a value for the individual, the community or the nation and it was obvious that the libraries that were visited were actively engaged in activities that supported these objectives, although they were rather more practically focused on their library and its activities. In order to capture evidence of the value of library services under such circumstances, therefore, one might turn to Brophy who proposed a new approach to impact evaluation by “painting rich pictures – in particular the use of narratives and story” (2008: 13). This might for example be achieved by deliberately collecting detailed reports of actual incidents and experiences of library services that make a difference in the lives of library users.

Library B, for example, was involved not only in a well-attended careers programme for young people in the community, but worked in partnership with a programme that provided senior high school pupils with additional tuition in their school subjects. While these are excellent programmes in themselves, and clearly appreciated by both the young participants and the volunteers that were assisting them, such initiatives could in addition be used to illustrate the library’s contribution to the Departmental objective of ‘improving school education outcomes as noted above.

In order, then, to set about gathering evidence

to this effect, additional and somewhat different information will have to be collected from programme participants. Basic information like names, schools and grade levels will probably be collected in any case; these must be retained for matching with school results at the end of the year to see whether participants have all passed or perhaps even if average pass rates are higher than class averages. Surveys and interviews with library users or participants in a library programme could specifically document reports on library impacts on their attitude to school work or to studying. The point is not to produce an avalanche of unmanageable information, but to gain actual and objective accounts and narratives of real differences that the library has made in specific lives. Such information, specifically collated and packaged to focus on the library's role in improving school results, will provide policy makers and funders with incontrovertible evidence of the library's contribution to delivering the governmental strategic plan.

Library B also offered well-attended programmes for mothers living in informal settlements, who gathered there with their toddlers to talk about child-rearing and other issues of importance to them – a clear example of 'increasing social cohesion'. Similarly, Library A was involved in regular story times and play programmes that kept younger children busy and occupied during afternoons and vacations. Such activities could be linked to the objective of 'creating a nation of readers'. Once more, in addition to routine counts of meetings and participants in both these cases, focusing on outcomes that matter to local authorities will enable libraries to gather evidence demonstrating the difference that they make in communities. Collecting evidence in these instances will involve talking to the mothers (in their own language) in the toddler groups, to document their reflections on how their relationships with their children, or their feelings of belonging in the community, have changed as a result of the library meetings. The children who attend the regular story-telling sessions could be monitored to find out from teachers or parents whether their reading, or their enthusiasm for reading, is different from that of other children in their classes. Here too, the aim is to find actual instances and narratives of change that have been effected through library interventions and to record and collect the rich detail

of individual occurrences to gather a body of documentation in this regard. Of course, in order to demonstrate impact in a scientific manner, such data and information would need to be collected before and after the introduction of the new services and then compared in order to convince that the new services have had significant beneficial impact.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the researchers have attempted to show that public libraries in the Western Cape are already engaged in many of the activities prescribed by the Charter, but not yet in attempts to evaluate their impact empirically and objectively. It is therefore suggested that in addition to the routine collection of basic statistics, libraries could select one or two of their regular activities or special projects and systematically gather tangible evidence of their impact. In this way, narratives that are backed up with objective and verifiable evidence can provide politicians and funders with incontrovertible proof of the value of public library services.

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