The roles of public libraries in enhancing educational systems and social inclusion in Africa

Asmaa Bouaamri[1]

Abstract Public libraries constitute an important part of social life and are crucial for supporting the educational system in any society. However, in many African countries, awareness of the role that public libraries can play in strengthening the social contract is largely unrecognized. This may be partly due to the social background that was/is based on oral tradition, to which libraries can adapt in order to sustain the tradition. In the current era, with the fast advancement of technologies, the library's role has changed from a passive institution to an active one by creating new interactive services and activities. The human right for each and every person to have access to information, education, and knowledge plays a significant role in the inclusion and integration of citizens for their life-long learning and continuous development. Countries' development relies on the participation of each citizen, who needs equal opportunities and quality education, including the right to benefit from public institutions such as libraries. Hence, this article explores the roles of public libraries in enhancing educational systems and social inclusion in Africa and provides some of the challenges and obstacles faced in this concern. It also examines some remedies and recommendations that can help strengthen social inclusion, particularly in certain African developing countries, as they aim to support the development of educational systems in isolated areas.

The development of countries and nations has been linked for decades with education. A focus on the importance of education as a necessary element for national development accelerated with the end of World War II (Chabbott & Ramirez, 2000). On the one hand, this aspect of education being essential for development is linked to it being "an investment

✉ Asmaa Bouaamri
   asmaa.bouaamri@gmail.com

[1] Institute of Library and Information Science, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Múzeum krt. 6-8, 1088 Budapest, Hungary

in human capital" (Chabbott & Ramirez, 2000) that allows for increasing and creating new knowledge, supporting economic and societal development in various aspects. On the other hand, and as reinforced in the report from UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education, education is a fundamental human right (Chabbott & Ramirez, 2000) that should be enhanced and rethought for a new form of social contract that can benefit all societies (UNESCO, 2021). According to the IFLA-UNESCO's Public Library Manifesto, updated in 2022, public libraries likewise act as "a vital force in the promotion of basic human rights" (Niegaard, 1994), which value "the right to know, to freedom of opinion, to seek and receive information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Niegaard, 1994).

With technological advancements, new inequalities have appeared, which have created new social, educational, political, and economic gaps in societies. According to UNESCO's ESD (Education for Sustainable Development 2030) (UNESCO, n.d.), we must produce and share knowledge to confront new challenges in climate change, economic inequalities, and social crises. Hence, there is a need to review education systems in all aspects and develop collaborations and partnerships to bridge numerous social—as well as digital—gaps. As such, this paper discusses the roles of libraries in educational systems as one of the most important and crucial collaborators and partners and as the backbone for the education of societies, with a focus on African societies. According to Anaba Alemna (1995), "rural communities in Africa need information for their daily lives", and "information needs cannot be met by databases and electronic delivery systems which are geared towards meeting the needs of the educated urban upper and middle classes" (p. 41). Furthermore, many traditional societies based on oral tradition need different services that libraries can provide by adapting to their social and cultural contexts.

In the African context, many public libraries were initially an establishment of the colonial powers that served the colonizers, their families, and other elite members of African societies who were educated to make use of them (Anaba Alemna, 1995; Moahi, 2019). Ignatow et al. (2012) note that investments in public libraries "have occurred during periods of either colonial administration or of post-revolutionary elite-led nation-building" and have "almost always been accompanied by heavy censorship, and been carried out expressly for purposes of social control" (p. 68). Thus, many African societies that endured colonization have built up an image that relates libraries with the colonial powers, perhaps creating fear, barriers, and hierarchies of superiority-inferiority linked to literacy and education. Therefore, the present article argues for the major role of the public library in supporting and uplifting education for social inclusion in developing countries. It also reviews some challenges encountered in Africa and introduces some remedies and recommendations for better functioning.

The role of public libraries and librarians in supporting educational systems

The role of public libraries in contemporary life is changing. According to Otike et al. (2021), for example, the Covid-19 pandemic changed the roles of libraries and their visions in providing new services and access to "fact-based information" to contain the spread of the virus but also to save time for their users. Ocholla and Ocholla (2020) attest that new trends of libraries and librarians have been embraced in the so-called "Fourth Industrial Revolution", including access to free Wi-Fi and internet, and access to information

resources physically and remotely that include e-materials, ICT tools, and assets (e.g., tablets, laptops, chargers, speakers, and so on). Under other conditions, Otike et al. (2021) opine that transformation is not happening in libraries for many different reasons, holding back public libraries in properly assisting African education systems. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, libraries were obliged to disrupt traditional ways of serving their users and create new online and remote services.

According to Boucher and Lance (1992), the role of public libraries is to "provide access to education by teaching information skills, by providing leadership and expertise in the use of information and information technologies, and by participating in networks that enhance access to resources outside the school or community" (p. 1). Public libraries can also help fortify equity within societies by addressing the needs of people and by providing free and equal access to information and knowledge, unhindered by any social, cultural, economic, political, or geographical impediments. Libraries can help prevent younger generations from engaging in drugs and violence by sustaining an educational environment that favors learning and self-development (Boucher & Lance, 1992). Otike et al. (2022) argue that libraries can also help reduce the prevalence of predatory journals and the dissemination of misinformation by "educating providers and the general public on identifying misinformation and locating accurate sources" (Pomputius, n.d.; as cited in Otike et al., 2022, p. 90). Furthermore, libraries can help education by enhancing students' ethical awareness by offering "information to escape plagiarism and breach of copyright, and also demonstrate awareness of controversial issues such as confidentiality, security, intellectual property, intellectual freedom, fair use, censorship and freedom of speech" (Otike et al., 2022, p. 90).

According to the American Library Association (ALA) (2012), libraries play a key role in creating and cultivating readers. Boucher and Lance (1992) state that public libraries are information centers that focus on organizing activities, meetings, and services by assisting citizens of all ages in their lifelong educational learning and helping sustain their independent development. Public libraries also, according to Boucher and Lance (1992), provide "timely, accurate, and useful information for community residents" (p. 3). As stated by Mahwasane (2017), librarians are everyday teachers who have a role to "support quality education" of individuals by providing them with "transformed and extended library services" (p. 42). Moreover, libraries aim to create a conducive learning environment that allows cooperation and social interactions between different people, especially students and teachers/instructors (Mahwasane, 2017). According to Bouaamri and Hajdu (2022), "The library space, physically or virtually, is not only a home for books and documents, but instead an environment full of emotions and history that is transferred from generation to generation in different ways, either through writings, songs or buildings" (p. 11). The authors quote Levinas (1979), who alludes that "Library space is a place for individuals to transcend" (p. 11). Bouaamri and Barátné Hajdu (2022) emphasize the role that public libraries play as reflections of their societies and buildings that preserve people's collective memory.

Public libraries also support the work of academic and school libraries, which serve specific populations such as students, researchers, teachers, and so on, by sustaining and aiding students and learners to enrich their cultural and social capital. In addition to this, library professionals can be the backbone of the education systems if they are well-informed and trained, as they can assist students in acquiring new skills and competencies to become acquainted with new technological developments. Mahwasane (2017) asserts that "teacher librarians have a duty to recognise the perception of independence, meaning the capability and the request to direct the library and all its documented and electronic

resources, independent of library staff" (p. 43). According to Mahwasane (2017, p. 43), citing Young (2011), "libraries are the place with gathered human cultural information resources and collected intelligence and experiences, and the place beginning scientific and technological improvements". In Africa, particularly in what is considered Africa's "developing countries", Ignatow et al. (2012), citing Putnam (2000), indicate that "absent sufficient capital, social actors become disengaged from civic life" (p. 70) and are susceptible to "symbolic violence" by social elites (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 70). According to Ignatow et al. (2012), "symbolic violence includes insecurity with regard to one's appearance, dialect, accent, tastes, or lack of cultural knowledge" (p. 70). As such, public libraries in African societies can assist citizens in building their cultural, social, and economic capital, as well as help individuals by equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge needed for their daily lives in order to help them identify any symbolic violence in their surroundings. However, this can only be achieved if public libraries actively interact with the communities in which they are implemented.

Hence, supporting the work of public libraries in any country, but especially in developing countries, can result in the advancement and evolution and continuous increase in the quality of education, as well as the quality of services provided by public libraries. Public libraries offer free access to information in order to build informed societies. According to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Declaration of 2003, public institutions need to:

> build a people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize, and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (WSIS, 2003)

As such, public libraries in developing countries should seek to improve their services and their staff's skills and abilities in order to meet their population's needs, especially in the current technological era (Bouaamri & Barátné Hajdu, 2022).

The public library and social inclusion

Social inclusion and social exclusion are two faces of the same coin: one of them is necessary to identify the other. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the United Nations Agenda 2030 indicates that inclusive and qualitative education for all is needed to promote individual lifelong learning (UN, 2015). Hence, to identify the complex meaning of social inclusion, we should seek to understand what social exclusion is and what it means, and how it takes forms and places in social life.

According to the UK Department for International Development (DFID) review (2005), the first aspect of exclusion concerns the participation of individuals and/or groups because of their social identity and/or their geographic social position. The second aspect of social exclusion identified by the DFID (2005) is the multidimensional and dynamic process of social exclusion, which *"refers to the social relations and organisational barriers that block the attainment of livelihoods, human development and equal citizenship. It can create or sustain poverty and inequality, and can restrict social participation"* (DFID, 2005, p. 9). As such, social exclusion can be identified according to the DFID's review as "a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social,

economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It derives from exclusionary relationships based on power" (p. 9). In addition, social inclusion is defined by the United Nations (UN) (2010) as "the process of improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged on the basis of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights" (UN, 2010; as cited by Adhikary et al., 2019, p. 160). Hence, one important aspect of social inclusion is to provide access to "organisations and institutional sites of power" (DFID, 2005, p. 9) to individuals and groups inside any society. This includes equal access to public libraries for communities, to allow them to create new opportunities and assist them in improving their lives and well-being. According to Ignatow et al. (2012), public libraries assist in social democratization and are "arsenals of democratic culture" (Ditzion, 1947; as cited by Ignatow et al., 2012, p. 68). Public libraries can offer and support self-imposed education and learning for individuals and communities in order to develop cultural, social, and human capital, thereby building and enforcing self-confidence and esteem and contributing to the development of their societies (Adhikary et al., 2019).

In Africa, public libraries can mediate between citizens and governments by providing access to information and helping individuals understand their environments, allowing them to take further steps toward being involved in society. At the same time, Muddiman et al. (2000) argue that public libraries were inaugurated as "agents of social change to educate the deserving poor—and partly as organs of social control—to manage the reading habits of the masses" (p. 12), which makes them not neutral institutions as they support the educational systems of communities. Public libraries also need to reinforce the inclusive heritage of different cultures and societies. Hence, the authors, citing Lionel McColvin, suggest that public libraries are institutions that should serve everyone within societies for the sake of social inclusion.

Conclusions

Public libraries can be important pillars in the educational system of any society, as they play a complementary role and enhance the reading and researching habits and abilities of individuals and communities. According to the IFLA-UNESCO (1994) Public Library Manifesto of 2022, public libraries "help ensure that the rights to education and participation in knowledge societies and the cultural life of the community are accessible to as many people as possible" (p. 1). However, the role of public libraries does not stop at providing sources and materials but also encourages equity and social inclusion of different groups and individuals within a community. As such, more efforts are needed to bring attention to the field of librarianship in Africa, as it can have a great impact on the development and well-being of communities.

In summary, public libraries in developing countries can help forge a new social contract by providing open access to knowledge and information resources, supporting educational systems, and bridging gaps between governments and citizens. Public libraries can foster information literacy and "assist individuals and groups with daily problem-solving and participation in the democratic process" (Anaba Alemna, 1995, p. 40). They can support all forms of human rights by making citizens aware of their rights and obligations inside their communities and represent "social change and inclusion" (Moahi, 2019, p. 239). They can help individuals and communities in developing their cultural and social capital and feelings of belonging to their communities and fulfill citizens' information needs by creating a

safe social environment where individuals can freely communicate their opinions. Finally, public libraries can promote reading culture in African oral tradition societies while at the same time preserving and disseminating communities' oral traditions and materials for present and future generations.

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Asmaa Bouaamri is a librarian and an anthropologist by profession. She holds a BA in library science and book jobs (*métiers du livre*) from Hassan II University in Casablanca, Morocco. She also holds an MA in cultural anthropology from Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest, Hungary, where she is currently pursuing her PhD studies. Asmaa worked as a librarian in a specialized library in Casablanca; she also did anthropological research on Gnaoua music and many other topics in the same field. She has published several articles, collaborated in book chapters, and participated in various international conferences. She is mainly interested in African studies, along with her specialization in the field of library and information science, focusing on literacy, knowledge management, sustainable development in libraries, and other multidisciplinary fields.