Connecting African libraries and development organizations

Perceptions and possibilities

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RESEARCH BRIEF

While perceptions of African libraries as development partners remain low and limited by development organizations, it is possible to change these perceptions. Quantitative data are necessary but insufficient in demonstrating library development value. Possible development partnership roles for African libraries are as community-embedded institutions, and development resource hubs.

Background

The Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) and African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA) have been collaborating on the Advancing Library Visibility in Africa (ALVA) project to examine the relationship between public libraries and development across Africa.

Across the continent, libraries are already doing work that advances development goals such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals and African Union Agenda 2063. However, many libraries struggle to build relationships with development organizations. A TASCHA study from 2012, *Beyond Access: Perceptions of libraries as development partners*, echoed that public libraries are typically overlooked as partners in development. Our 2019 study sought current perceptions among development organizations of African libraries in order to ask how libraries can position themselves as potential partners.

Research process

In late 2019 we conducted interviews with 21 people who currently work for development organizations that fund or implement projects

in Africa, who are based in North America, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa and work on behalf of bilateral, multilateral, and non-governmental organizations including private foundations and faith-based organizations. Several interesting findings emerged that can help us bridge the gap between libraries and development organizations.

Main findings

Current perceptions of libraries remain low and limited. Responses suggested a general lack of perception of libraries among development organizations, with almost half of participants reporting little to no professional experience with libraries. Seven participants reported that they had no perception of how libraries related to development, and some perceived that libraries simply do not exist in the African countries where their organization works.

Those that did perceive libraries offered a limited perception, often associating libraries with books and literacy only. There was also a shared belief that libraries simply do not have capacity to be active partners in development, citing outdated facilities, untrained staff, and lack of technology or technical expertise and

other resources, among other potential challenges to partnering with them.

It is possible to change perceptions of African libraries, and some have already shifted. In spite of a lack of visibility, at least six participants reported a change in views over time to see libraries as development partners, motivated by either participation in our interview or contact with colleagues who had experience with libraries in development. Seven participants expressed that libraries would be eligible partners if they were visible, and some were hopeful that this was "very doable" through strategic messaging which leverages libraries' value. This outlook suggests that it is possible to change the perceptions of libraries in the eyes of development organizations and prompted us to suggest some possibilities.

Roles exist for African libraries as community-embedded institutions and development resource hubs. We asked what organizations are looking for in partners in order to suggest more concrete roles for libraries. First, the role for libraries as **community-embedded institutions** responds to the desire for community-based partners who are "steeped in certain communities," trusted locally, net-

worked with local bodies, and have local expertise as well as access to local data. Participants also suggested that libraries could bring unique insight into community problems and solutions that would make them more effective as partners.

Another role available to libraries is **a hub for resources that development organizations need** in terms of **space, data, and research**. Many participants thought of a library as a "gathering space" or "platform" and were able to imagine possibilities for development programming in this space. Participants also expressed a desire for data that address current gaps in official sets. To provide these data, libraries could leverage access to local populations, given their role as "places where a lot of people go." Participants also imagined libraries disseminating research from their organizations, for "awareness raising" or storing African "local content and indigenous knowledge." Therefore, if libraries can position themselves as spaces where organizations can host programs, access unique data, and share research, development organizations may have increased interest in partnering with them.

Quantitative output data, especially on library usage and demographics of users, are important to demonstrate the capacity of libraries in development. It is not enough for libraries to have the potential to fill these roles – they also must prove to development organizations that they will succeed in meeting this potential. Many participants expressed a preference for partners "who can do the work" of development projects and have a "track record" to prove it. When asked what qualities their organizations look for in potential partners, participants most frequently mentioned expertise as well as being generally capable and functional.

To convince development organizations of library value, interviews emphasized the importance of output data, defined as information on the direct services and usage of the library. Participants suggested that such data would be useful to make a case for library impact, and there was a slight preference for quantitative data that allow organizations to "sell and to demonstrate undeniable success." Output data were most frequently mentioned as the type of data that organizations would want from libraries, including library usage in terms of user numbers and demographics, number of people attending library programs, content or collections, and number of staff. In addition, multiple participants expressed a desire to reach "target populations" including "marginalized groups" such as women, youth, or refugees. Taken together, these responses suggest that quantitative data on library output, and in particular usage and user demographics, would be effective in order to address the concerns of development organizations.

Data is not a magic bullet. Participants mentioned many other factors beyond data that influence the partnership decisions of development organizations including networking, referrals from colleagues, prior work with an organization, ability to craft convincing proposals, and library marketing to "put themselves out there." They also emphasized that the types of data that would be most useful for libraries to collect were highly dependent on the needs of the project and its funder. In the end, African libraries may have data and determination, but without well-connected advocates and the ability to wield data effectively, their potential as development partners may stall.

Recommendations
For library systems

- For those who are interested in attracting development organizations, consider framing library work in terms of connections to the local community, attention to marginalized groups, and past successes in implementing programs.

- Consider collecting quantitative data on library usage and user demographics. Note that other types of data may be useful for different organizations and goals, so consider collecting a variety of data if possible.

- Continue to network with development organizations. For international audiences, consider promoting library strengths as community-embedded institutions and hubs for development resources including space, data, and research.

For library support organizations

- Support library efforts to network with development organizations directly. Consider organizing networking events for library representatives and/or putting libraries into direct contact with development organizations.

- Continue to build the capacity of libraries to connect with development organizations. Consider supporting skills such as marketing, storytelling, basic analyzing and reporting of quantitative and qualitative data, applying for grants, and writing proposals with a focus on using data effectively.

For development organizations

- Acknowledge the development work African libraries are already doing.

- Consider contacting a library directly in a country where your organization works. For library location and contact information, see ALVA's map of African libraries at www.librarysites.io

- Discuss the possibility of partnering with African libraries with colleagues.

For researchers

- Research the data collection practices of public library systems across Africa to continue to build capacity in library use of data for self-advocacy.

- Research and consider unintended consequences of aligning African public libraries with development organizations, for example, how data about library users are collected and used by development organizations.