Leadership Excellence in Librarianship - the INELI Experience for Africa

Gertrude Kayaga Mulindwa

Abstract
Librarianship in Africa has come into its own in the twenty first century. Previously viewed as a support service; supporting teachers to teach; supporting doctors to heal; supporting lawyers to win cases; librarianship for many years was at the periphery of development. Over the past two decades, libraries are increasingly becoming central to the development of society because they are the communal places that everyone in a community, be it an academic, school, research, village or urban community, uses on a level and neutral ground. Libraries are no longer being described as ‘places where books are kept’. They are instead being seen as vital in a person’s life long learning journey where people develop themselves, support each other, commune with each other and learn together. This paradigm shift is a result of the important role that library leadership at all levels is playing.

This paper looks at the way public libraries are increasingly supporting the 21st Africans to develop themselves as individuals and as communities. It examines the meaning of ‘leadership’ and the qualities of a leader at all levels of service delivery. It draws on the experience of African participants in the International Network of Emerging Library Innovators (INELI), an initiative that is developing leadership in the public library sector. It looks at how they are shaping the library landscape in their respective countries. It concludes by looking into the future and what African librarianship needs to do to ensure that a new crop of leaders is continuously being developed for each coming generation.

Key Words - African Librarianship, INELI, Leadership, Public libraries

Background
Libraries have in the past been seen as support services, providing information resources to a wide variety of people to help them fulfill their research needs, to study, to relax and ultimately to achieve lifelong learning. In an academic setting, libraries have supported lecturers and students to carry out their teaching and learning roles. In specialist environments such as medicine, agricultural research, engineering and law, libraries play the vital role of providing information for the specialists to perform their work and also to add to existing knowledge. In public libraries, members of the public have always used the facilities for quiet study and relaxation. This supportive role has unfortunately in the
past, perpetuated the perception of libraries as being at the periphery of development. Yet libraries, by their nature and important services that they provide, are vital for the intellectual growth of the individual and for cohesion in the community.

African public libraries in particular have been seen to be places where mostly students take their notebooks and textbooks to study for their exams. The 1980s, saw the slow down and stagnation of African economies and therefore a reduction in the resources available to provide infrastructure and social services. Libraries of all types were among the services that were negatively affected and they increasingly became places of empty shelves. In cases where they had books, these books were mostly outdated because libraries could no longer purchase the foreign currency needed to acquire new information materials.

There was now talk of a book famine in Africa as put by Michael Crowder in a 1986 address to the twenty-fourth annual general meeting of the Standing Conference on Library Materials for Africa. He talked about the dearth of books on the continent and how it would affect the ability of people to deal with the problems of the day. He compared it to the famine of 1984 that ravaged the Horn of Africa. He went on to say that while the scarcity of food was very visible on television screens around the world and therefore attracted attention and aid, the book famine was not so visible and had therefore gone unnoticed for a long time. There were empty library shelves and under-employed librarians across most countries of Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Besides the scarce resources, there was also the issue of libraries not being relevant to the needs of most Africans. Many writers, mostly academics, criticized public libraries in particular, for serving only the educated elite. Adimorah (1993), Alegbeleye (1998), Banjo (1998), Olden (1995) Wehmeyer (1991) and many others wrote about the need for a paradigm shift in the way public libraries in Africa operated and the need to ensure that the services they offered were suitable and relevant to the needs of their communities.

The 1990s saw the beginning of the great technological innovations in the world. These innovations have enabled the ability of the individual to access information seamlessly across borders, continents and time zones. They have also enabled individuals to create and publish their own information. The way libraries operate has therefore had to change and the way that librarians interface with library users has taken on a different dimension. Librarians have to contend with new technologies, to provide all kinds of content, on all types of devices, using all sorts of applications, and serving users in different locations. To complicate matters, the information seeking behaviours of users and potential users has greatly changed. They can seek for information from anywhere, pass it on to the next person who can edit it and publish it to hundreds of people and all this from a hand held device. They can also use information from the traditional print, take pictures of what they want in the item and send it to colleagues thousands of kilometres away.

In Africa, the academic libraries were ‘the first to arrive’ in the use of technologies, first using them to ease work flow in their technical departments and later integrating them into the resources of the library services. Through this, they made themselves
indispensable to the communities in institutions of higher learning. They have teamed up with development agencies to negotiate with publishers to make online resources available at reduced rates. They have also devised means of ensuring that a part of the revenue from the tuition fees paid by students is spent on the library. The funds are then used to enhance the various services including provision of online resources. In addition, an upsurge in the establishment of universities and other institutions of higher learning on the continent has necessitated the creation of national councils/commissions of higher education that in most cases are required to carry out the accreditation of courses taught and also ensure quality control. The presence of a library service, with relevant resources and qualified staff is one of the requisites for an institution to gain a license to operate and then eventually receive a Charter.

Public libraries are also ‘taking their place at the table’. While the print word remains an important part of information dissemination, there are many other information needs in an African community that cannot be met through print resources. In cases where information can only be accessed through the new technologies, public libraries, are the only safe, neutral spaces that can make it possible for those unable to afford the new technology to access it. They can also be used as the meeting point where indigenous information can be recorded and stored. Further to that, they can be the centre from which government information is dispensed to citizens. In many cases, they are the meeting place for different groups of people such as women and youth. They are the equalizing spaces and services in a community.

Public libraries have over the past few years linked their work to the development of their respective countries and the attainment of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the 2000 United Nations Summit. The post 2015 Sustainable Development Agenda will also require public librarians to be innovative and at the centre of their communities. They are therefore identifying particular groups and areas of concern in their communities and targeting their services towards them. There are many examples of public libraries that have been working with a particular group of people in the community to achieve the MDGs. In Kenya, the library in a slum area of Nairobi has provided tablets that contain set textbooks that would not otherwise be available to the children in the area. In Uganda, the Kabale Public library teamed up with the African Medical Relief Foundation, to provide health information services and encourage youth to live responsibly. In Senegal, the library is working with the youth to develop their artistic talent and perhaps in future earn a living from it. All these and many others are examples of libraries taking their rightful place in society.

**Leadership and the impact of libraries on their communities**

The success of any 21st century organization besides requiring good management of resources, also requires continuous injections of new ideas that will make a positive change. It will require a good leader to ensure that the organization that she/he leads is dynamic and thrives on innovation. There are many qualities that have been identified as essential to the making a good leader. Steven Bell (2013) citing Meister and Willford in
their article ‘5 New Skills needed for leadership in 2020’ listed the skills needed for a good leader and which could be applied to library leadership as being:

- having a collaborative mindset;
- putting together teams;
- tech savvy;
- globally focused and culturally attuned;
- future-focused.

Other management experts have also talked about:

- the ability to delegate,
- communication on all matters,
- commitment,
- the ability to inspire and motivate others,
- the ability to listen to ideas and encourage,
- a positive attitude towards work and
- an innovative attitude.

Experts may vary slightly on the qualities that they consider important. However, they all seem to agree that nobody can have all qualities and some have to be learned as one progresses, so the ability to recognize one’s weaknesses and do something about them is also a quality of a good leader.

Public libraries in Africa, because of their wide and varied clientele must exercise the freedom to experiment and bring new services to their clientele. This requires for leaders to make use of all available skills and ideas within the organization and encourage innovation. While in terms of space, library services can successfully operate from anywhere, they can not successfully operate without information materials in whatever format (print, electronic, audio, oral etc.) and the human skills to organize them for their respective communities. The human resource itself is vital in ensuring that the information gets to the rightful user. They also risk becoming obsolete if they do not introduce new services suitable for the 21st Century African. A leader must therefore motivate and encourage those that are led, to be innovative. In the process, they all become leaders as implementers of the particular innovations that they initiate.

In the 21st century, the buzz word on everyone’s lips regarding the advancement of libraries to ensure their positive impact on communities is “Innovation”. All agree that in the world of constant technological changes and growth, libraries and librarians have to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ in order to stay relevant. They must find their rightful place on
the path that everybody is treading least they risk becoming irrelevant. Further there is need to seek out other development workers in the community to work together so that the community is given a complete package comprising of the service and the information that goes with it. They must be ready to use the technologies that are now available to help their communities advance. Luckily the librarians that are coming out of library schools are tech-savvy and can use their skills to develop relevant services. What needs to be done is for the leaders to encourage their teams to link development needs to library resources and librarians’ skills. Those needs include but are not limited to:

- access to e-government services such as voter registration, passport applications and Income tax returns;
- Information on maternal and child health
- Adolescent health information
- Information on water and sanitation
- Finding out about crop diseases and market prices
- Looking for employment and education opportunities
- Information on governance matters to enable participation in the democratization process.

All these services need to be initiated by able leaders. These leaders will also be required to look into the future and determine the best course that the library service should take in view of factors both internal and external that will influence library services. Such leaders will not ‘just happen’ but will need to be identified, mentored and nurtured. Fortunately, there is increasing recognition that one generation of leaders has the responsibility to ensure that there is a new crop of leaders to take over as they leave the field. African librarianship can therefore take lessons from the International Network of Emerging Library Innovators (INELI).

**The International Network of Emerging Library Innovators**

The International Network of Emerging Library Innovators (INELI) is a project of the Global Libraries Initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It aims at developing the next crop of public library leaders that will take the profession forward in the 21st century. Its basic objectives are:

1. To create an international network of future library leaders to build and sustain public libraries throughout the world.
2. To explore or address global library issues that have the potential to stimulate, expand, or improve public library service.
3. To enhance the leadership skills of new professionals to enable them to redefine public libraries for the future to meet the unique needs of the people in their respective countries.
The project brought together library professionals identified as potential leaders to meet, explore and learn together about leadership skills needed to take public libraries forward. Participants or Innovators as they are referred to in the project, came from different countries around the globe and the first INELI cohort included six African Innovators. Each Innovator was required to identify a “Sponsor” who would give them professional support through the two years of the project and beyond. Sponsors were mostly, though not necessarily, supervisors of the Innovators. There were also six ‘mentors’ who were professional library managers from different countries. Their job was to advise the Innovators on personal learning plans and a collaborative project and also to provide them with general counsel. There were three parts to the project. The first part was an online course. This was made up of the following modules:

- Time management
- Conflict resolution
- Communication skills
- Innovation
- Risk Management
- Project Management

Each Innovator had to do each module of the course and had the support and counsel of his/her Sponsor and the group Mentor. Secondly, the Innovators were grouped into threes or fours and each group was assigned a Mentor. The Innovators in any group came from different parts of the world. They were also required to develop and work on an online collaborative project on a topic of their choice. The Mentor would then guide them as a group during the time they worked on the project. At the end of the programme for the first Cohort, the innovators produced reports that had come as a result of their collaborative work. These reports are:

- Breaking the Library Stereotype One Room at a Time
- Building Libraries for Tomorrow
- Community Stories: Advocacy Toolkit
- Strong Partnerships Build Strong Libraries
- What Counts?: A Library Leaders’ Guide to Creating a Data-Centered Advocacy Strategy


The third part of the project was three convenings in different parts of the world. The Innovators and mentors came together in 2011 at the beginning of the project, 2012 and 2013, while the sponsors attended the 2011 and 2013 convenings. During these
convenings, they were able to discuss best practice taking place in their libraries, and also work on their collaborative projects as well as visit libraries in the host country.

The second group of Innovators started in 2013 by attending a meeting that coincided with the last convening of the first Cohort. They are now into their final year of the project and are due to meet again in October this year. They are all involved in online learning and regularly consult their mentors and sponsors, while frequently communicating with the trainers.

**INELI African Participants**

Participants in the first cohort included librarians from Botswana, Egypt, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda. The second cohort, which is in its last year includes Innovators from Botswana, Uganda and Senegal.

I followed up on the Innovators to find out how their INELI experience has influenced their work and their leadership style, if at all. Of the nine Innovators, five of them responded to my questionnaire about their INELI experience.

**Innovators’ Management Skills**

All the respondents, except one are currently in middle management. This means that they are most likely to take up higher leadership positions in the field in the next few years. They all felt that their participation in INELI had been a great learning experience and self-discovery. The respondent who is in top management feels that she has undergone a lot of learning to do things in the library even better. She is now able to find alternative solutions to any challenges with teamwork and is able to better advocate for the library. Furthermore, she is changing her management style to ensure strong relationships, trust and teamwork within her organization.

All respondents indicated that during their participation in INELI, they realized that they knew much less than what they thought they knew. The INELI experience opened their eyes to the many possible ways in which they could do things in order to serve their communities. They further were able to share what they were doing in their respective libraries and two of them indicated that what they may have felt as being insignificant in their work was seen as something progressive by some other people and helped those people to build on their ideas. One was inspired by the INELI experience to partner with an international organization to organize a workshop on Digital Libraries for librarians in the region.

**Time Management**

They indicated that they are better able to manage time and accomplish tasks by setting priorities, doing something as simple as setting time aside for individual tasks. One indicated that she locks her office door for a specified time so that she is able to concentrate on the task at hand. Once the task is completed, she is able to give her
undivided attention to other matters. This had seemed like a small matter before, but became significant because she is now able to achieve more at work by giving her team undivided attention at the right time.

**Conflict resolution**

The experience shared with other INELI participants, plus the online training module helped them to know how to handle conflict at the work place. One respondent indicated how she was able to handle conflict between the team that she leads by listening to both sides of the conflict and talking to each individual in her team. Before INELI, this participant felt that she would have reported the incident to top management without exploring other channels first. INELI has given her the confidence to be the leader that she is. Another indicated how she now depends on creating strong team work to avoid any conflicts at the work place.

**Innovation and Risk Management**

All respondents felt that they are now able to come up with innovative programmes in their libraries and have in the process not been afraid of taking risks. They have instead looked at the positive side of any challenges and found solutions. Two indicated that they have further been able to convince top management to try out new innovations and these innovations have been successful. One was able to work with the Local Council authorities to put a stand outside the library premises to attract possible users, particularly the youth. This idea would not have been possible without the learning about risk taking that she attained through INELI. She is looking at seeking out more partnerships.

**New Innovative services**

The respondents felt that they have been rejuvenated and have started thinking “outside the box” and see libraries as part of the bigger picture of development. They are therefore initiating services that will uplift their communities. One, for example has developed an ICT training service for pregnant teenagers and already started on a project to give financial literacy to women. This, is in collaboration with a bank, which has interest in having more women customers. Another has gone on to assist artistes to develop their talent, while another is working with others to start a regional INELI for her part of the continent.

Perhaps most importantly is belonging to the INELI support network which they can turn to for support, advice and best practice.

**Public Library Leaders in 21st Century Africa**

Ward and others (2013) in their INELI collaborative project indicated that it is important to encourage staff to lead from any position in the organization and that this theme should become central in change and performance management in libraries.
Africans in the 21st century are increasingly keeping up with their counterparts in other regions of the world. Kenya and Nigeria for example, are among the world’s fastest growing economies. (Robinson, 2015). The use of the Internet among ordinary African by mobile phone or through Internet Cafes has also steadily grown over the past five years. Librarians at every level are required to be innovative and integrate the new technologies in their services so that they assist their communities to take full advantage of the technological revolution. In order to ensure that public libraries thrive in the future, today’s top library leaders need to do the following:

1. Develop a continental plan to train and develop library leaders. The very fine example of INELI is available and it could be adapted to the African situation. All countries should be involved in ensuring that their library services take advantage of any such continental undertaking. Within the regional INELI, the Training of Trainers must be given great attention to ensure that there is a multiplier effect.

2. Develop national plans for library leadership. This can be done by working with library schools. There sometimes seem to be a great disparity between what library schools teach and what the field, especially the public library field, needs. Public library leaders need therefore to work closely with library schools in their countries to develop programmes that address the continuous leadership development of those librarians already in the field.

3. Seek for, form, develop and nurture partnerships. Libraries can not afford to exist in isolation. As part of the community, they need to work hand in hand with other organisations where they are based. Library leaders must therefore seek out and extend a hand to those organisations. The upcoming library leaders must be encouraged from the beginning to make partnerships development part of their work and therefore of the organisation.

4. Use retired librarians to mentor young people. Identify and seek out library leaders who have retired from the field to give guidance, counsel and support to the upcoming leaders.

Conclusion
Public libraries is the place to be in the 21st century. Where else, within the library profession, does a librarian have the freedom to explore together with his/her community and directly relate their work, their life and their achievements to people’s everyday lives? The emerging leaders of this important institution must therefore be sought out, nurtured and set free to achieve, excel and propel public libraries forward.

References


