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## The impact of public libraries on community development: an exploratory study

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The purpose of this research is to establish the impact that public libraries have on the development of communities with particular reference to the Harare Public Library (Khayelitsha, Cape Town) that opened for the first time in 2011. The role that public libraries play as a gateway to information from a number of sources has impact on the following, according to Streatfield (2009: 138):

- Education
- Health
- Culture and leisure
- Economic development
- Communication
- E-government

With these impact areas in mind this study attempts to draw correlation between library activities and services with measurable changes in these areas and the development of the library's community towards an improvement in the quality of life for its members.

There is much evidence in the literature to suggest that there is pressure to measure the impact of library services. The works of Markless and Streatfield (2006), Poll and Payne (2006) and Debono (2002) reflect this view and reiterate the need to ascertain the value and impact of public libraries. De Jager and Nassimbeni (2010) point out that there is limited work done on impact and assessment in the public library sector in South Africa. In the spirit of the ideals set out in the Library and Information Services Transformation Charter (2009) with regard to the value and influence of public libraries on the lives of people and communities, this research sets out to gather relevant evidence to measure the impact of public library services on the community.

The objective of this exploratory pilot research exercise is to focus on one of the above impact areas, in particular education. Since it is too soon to collect data from the Harare Public Library, this research area will be initiated by using a 'substitution method' to establish a possible correlation between improved school performance and library use. Any such improvement should impact positively on the quality of life of members of the community.

Questionnaires and interviews will be administered to Grades 8 and 9 learners and educators, respectively, at a school in close proximity to a library with a similar community profile to that of the Harare Public Library (hence the 'substitution method'). This preliminary study and precursor into a wider and ongoing research undertaking will focus on English as a secondary school subject-offering as the research is based on the assumption that library usage, because of its natural relationship with reading and language usage, is most likely to manifest itself in improvement in performance in English (as a subject-offering)

This paper captures the methodological paths and challenges of this exploratory study towards measuring the impact of public libraries on community development.

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