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Moving Beyond “Outreach”: Reflections on Two Case Studies of Community Library Services in South Africa

The proposed paper will examine the contribution, real and potential, of public libraries in South Africa to providing access to the information or knowledge society and to sustainable development. The discussion is grounded in two case studies of two community libraries - one rural, one urban.

An important strategy in South Africa’s plans to improve its position in the global economy is to align itself with other emerging economies, like Brazil, China and India. But surely the biggest hurdle must be the huge gap in South Africa between rich and poor – claimed by some to be the biggest in the world. More than 48% of South Africans live below the poverty line. There is a strong thread of evidence in the literature of the role of information in the sustainable development required to narrow the poverty gap. The developed countries of the so-called “North” have systems for easy and wide access to information – by means of e-government, e-medicine, e-education, and, so on. However, less than 10% of South Africans have access to the Internet. The point of departure for the speaker’s research is the developmental model of library proposed in the recent Library & Information Services (LIS) Transformation Charter, a vision document emanating from the South African National Council of Library and Information Services. The Charter suggests that UNESCO’s eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) might provide a framework for developmental library services. However, the Charter’s country-wide investigations, as well as the speaker’s own research since the late 1990s, have uncovered some of the daunting challenges ahead.

The proposed paper will report on two ongoing case studies, which might throw light on how the Charter’s vision could become a reality. One is of a group of dual use school community libraries in a remote rural region and the other focuses on a community library in a township on the outskirts of Cape Town. The argument is that what are often viewed as “outreach” programmes point the way to new models of library service which will be meaningful to far more than the present tiny minority of South African library users.

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