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RESEARCH ARTICLE

International library standards for low-resource countries: the example of Rwanda

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Abstract

Library standards for low-resource countries are intended to make it easier to set up and run a library even with few resources. The client for this thesis is COERESO (Cooperation, Equality, Respect), an association active in Rwanda. In order to develop an understanding of the conditions in low-resource countries, relevant sociological terms are defined. Then, based on the literature and on statements from school officials and students, criteria are created which serve as a basis for library standards. In addition, the standards and manifestos of IFLA and UNESCO were used as a source of inspiration.

Résumé

Les normes de bibliothèque applicables aux pays à faible niveau de ressources visent à faciliter la mise en place et le fonctionnement d'une bibliothèque, même avec peu de ressources. Le client de cette thèse était COERESO (Cooperation, Equality, Respect, Solidarity), une association active au Rwanda. Afin de mieux comprendre les conditions dans les pays à faible niveau de ressources, les termes sociologiques pertinents sont définis dans un premier temps. Ensuite, sur la base de la littérature et de déclarations de responsables et d'étudiants de l'école, sont créés des critères qui servent de base aux normes de la bibliothèque. De plus, les normes et les manifestes de l'IFLA et de l'UNESCO ont servi de source d'inspiration.

Introduction

This article summarizes the results that I produced as part of my bachelor's thesis during my studies in Information Science. It was my original intention to travel to Rwanda to gather impressions myself and to form an independent assessment. However, like so many other things, this was not possible due to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. This work was done with the support of the COERESO association.[1] Through interviews and a survey, some impression of the current situation in nursery and primary schools in Rwanda could be gained. The head teachers of

[1] https://coereso.ch/

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Table 1. Schools interviewed, June 2021

School	District	Type of school	Number of pupils
ARISE TVET School	Kicukiro	Technical and vocational training	49
Volunteers in Education	Gasabo	Nursery, primary school	51
Wellborn Child Foundation	Kicukiro	Nursery, youth work, community centre	81

the following institutions in Rwanda were interviewed: ARISE TVET School,[2] Volunteers in Education[3] and Wellborn Child Foundation.[4] All three educational institutions are located in the province of Kigali and are not publicly funded. Thus, financial resources are scarce, and staff often work on a voluntary basis. In Rwanda, it is generally possible to send children to free public schools. However, high fees are charged for school uniforms and materials, which families cannot afford. In addition, the public schools are considered to be of insufficient quality (COERESO 2021). As a result, although privately funded schools are more costly for parents, they can be more flexible if money for school fees is not readily available. For example, all head teachers mention that it is possible for parents to pay off school fees in instalments. The focus is that the children receive a solid education.

One wish that all three institutions mentioned is to be able to build their own library. They recognize the value of libraries and all three believe that with the help of a library they could enhance the relevance of their own school. In order to set up a library in a school or in a small community, in addition to solid financing, knowledge of what the population, the target groups, expect is necessary. Also, a basic knowledge of librarianship makes it much easier to set up and run a library. However, for staffing and financial reasons, it is often not possible to employ a person with this knowledge at schools like the ones interviewed. It follows that these tasks would have to be doable by existing staff. In Rwanda, there are guidelines for libraries, but these focus strongly on the already existing National Library and the Kigali Public Library, the largest public library in Rwanda (MINISPOC 2018; NAEB 2017). The libraries in the schools, however, will be smaller and, above all, need to get by with only a few financial resources. It would also need to be possible to manage the school library without years of training. With this in mind, I have created a standard guide for public and school libraries in low-resource countries based on the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) standards and the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) manifestos. This guide is intended to support schools or communities in setting up and running a library. The guide deliberately contains simple formulations and does not go into detail in order not to discourage the user. It should be as simple as possible to set up and run a library, and it should be feasible for as many institutions as possible.

[2] https://coereso.ch/arise-tvet-school/
[3] https://coereso.ch/nursery-by-volunteers-in-education/
[4] https://coereso.ch/wbcf/

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Relevance

How should a standard guide for public and school libraries help a poor country like Rwanda? One principle was clear to all three interviewees from the beginning: education is a way out of poverty. Education promotes democracy (Harber 2002: 272), health and social and political participation (Gottburgsen and Sixt 2012: 102). And this is where libraries, as freely accessible places of knowledge and lifelong learning, can offer support. They offer space for intellectual and cultural development and for meeting like-minded people. As Aman (2007: 80) aptly puts it: 'Libraries and librarians hold a key role in forming the lives of African children, the future citizens of a hopefully democratic society. Treat them with respect, trust them, and make them love books, knowledge, enrich their imagination, and help them live a dream.' Of course, not only children are welcome in libraries; young people and adults of all backgrounds, ages and educational levels can also benefit from a library. But first there has to be a library in a community.

The interviewed head teachers were referred to me by COERESO. All three schools have been supported by the association for a long time. Years of acquaintanceship led to the establishment of trust, from which I was able to benefit during the interviews. The three interview partners were very open and even delicate topics (e.g., the direct and indirect consequences of the genocide in 1994) could be addressed. This enabled me to get the best possible impression of the situation in Rwanda without being able to visit the country myself. After the interviews, I categorized the answers and soon realized that the statements of the interview partners overlapped in many areas. At this point, I would like to thank them again for their insightful conversations. In a further step, I sent out a short survey to all three schools, which was filled out by the pupils. The aim here was to find out how the children perceive the schools and whether a library is at all desired. It turned out that the schools are very much appreciated, and the pupils like to visit them, but unfortunately many were not familiar with the term 'library', which made it difficult to get a meaningful result. However, this is in itself a result and shows the potential for public and school libraries in low-resource countries.

Library standard guide

IFLA offers a wide range of different standards for the different areas of the library. These are implemented worldwide and can be downloaded Open Access from the IFLA website.[5] There are standards for public and school libraries, but these often require resources such as electricity, electronic equipment, and internet access – resources that are not available or are inadequate in institutions such as those interviewed. Thus, these standards are only applicable to a small extent to these library projects. The manifestos published jointly by IFLA and UNESCO[6] are also a good basis for libraries, although they are formulated too generally to provide support in practice.

[5] https://www.ifla.org/de/units/standards/

[6] Public Library Manifesto (IFLA and UNESCO: 1994) new version under revision; School Library Manifesto (Boekhorst: 2021) open for comments.

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Procedure

The existing standards and manifestos served as the basis for creating the library standards for low-resource countries like Rwanda. In a first step, the IFLA standards were analysed to determine which resources are necessary for implementation (Koontz and Gubbin: 2010). I found that of the 155 standards, fifty require electricity, internet access and/or computers and ninety-five require trained staff. These are of little use to low-resource countries, as it is precisely these resources that are lacking. Other resources, such as separate rooms for events or air-conditioning infrastructure, were also out of the question. So a new guide, based on the existing ones, had to be created. This standard guide also mentions electricity or internet access, but these are optional. The standards can also be implemented when these resources are missing.

Structure of the standard guide

In this section I discuss the contents of the standard guide and briefly summarize the individual sub-chapters.

Preface

The standard guide begins by explaining why standards are relevant for school and public libraries in low-resource countries. School and public libraries are then defined, based on various sources, followed by the purposes and functions of these institutions.

Legal and financing

In a next step, there are references to possible national library regulations, which should primarily be observed when setting up and managing libraries. Since these vary from country to country, or in some cases do not even exist, they will not be discussed further. Furthermore, reference is made to the manifestos of IFLA and UNESCO (Boekhorst 2021; IFLA and UNESCO 1994). Various possibilities of funding are also mentioned, which probably cannot all be requested; the differences between institutions, communities and countries can be huge (Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 28–9). What should not be forgotten are the regular expenses (salaries, rent, media purchase, internet access etc.) as well as a cushion for irregular or unexpected expenses.

Identifying the needs of the school and community library users

In this section, the target groups of the library and their needs should be defined. This analysis differs from institution to institution and in fact has to be done individually by each institution. It is advisable to carry out such an analysis regularly in order to offer the best possible service to one's users (Aman 2007: 79; Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 11). In the standard guide, some possible target groups are listed, but the list can be supplemented individually. In addition, a list is provided of how such an analysis can be carried out, especially in view of the fact that it must be assumed that there are no trained persons present in the institutions (Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 51).

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Access and information for all

This section is dedicated to access to information for all. In order to make an impact in the fight against poverty through education, several points must also be taken into consideration. For example, boys, girls, men, women and physically or mentally handicapped persons should have equal access to information (Aman 2007: 79–81). Consideration should also be given to regional language and cultural characteristics. This ensures that all people have access to information and knowledge.

School and community library building and infrastructure

This section is dedicated to infrastructure. These are some of the more costly standards in the guide. An attempt has been made to show low-cost or even free alternatives so that library projects do not fail at this point. For example, rooms can be used jointly with a community centre or a school (Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 15). For the furniture, a fundraising campaign can help, or perhaps someone can be found who builds shelves themselves, for example. A cost-effective alternative is the mobile library. This can consist of a bus, a bicycle trailer, a boat, or even a packhorse – there are no limits to the imagination. In larger and more dispersed communities, a combination of options may be appropriate.

Library services

In the section 'Library services' there is a brief summary of various services that a library should offer in order to be recognized as such (Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 51). This includes the promotion of reading and information literacy. In order to use these points competently and in a way that is beneficial for library users, it is advisable to undergo training in these areas. The item 'Digital access' is optional, as electronic devices and internet access must be guaranteed for this.

Collection management

Collection management falls under the heading of classic library tasks. Purchasing, presenting, and updating the media stock requires time and also a certain basic knowledge, which can be acquired with courses and further training. In small libraries this is less relevant than in larger ones, nevertheless it is helpful and relieving to know how stock management works, at least in the basics. In order to keep up to date, various sources can be consulted, such as bestseller lists, displays in bookshops, the curriculum of the nearest school or the wishes of library users. It is also important to keep non-fiction and specialist literature up to date and not to offer outdated media (Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 70–3).

Events and courses

This section is somewhat optional, but not to be neglected should the necessary resources be available. Events and courses in the library are important for lifelong learning and community exchange. There are several ways to do this. On the one hand, these events can be offered by the library itself, such as reading promotion and motivation, readings or topics on digital information search. On the other hand,

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the library should also be open for events organised by people from the community. These can be events where people meet and sing, paint, dance or tell each other stories.

Cooperation and resource sharing

Especially in areas where resources are constantly scarce, cooperation can be important. Several small libraries achieve more when they work together. For example, media can be exchanged or each library could specialize in one topic, provided the institutions are not too far apart. Staff can also be deployed in different places. If a digital library guide is maintained, the entries can be passed on to each other so that they do not have to be entered by each institution. Cooperation with NGOs is also a good idea, as the focus here is also on supporting people. The guide offers a list of library-related NGOs that can be considered for cooperation.

Library management

The library management section requires a basic knowledge of personnel management, budgeting and financing (Aman 2007: 81). For the person managing the library, no matter how small, it is advisable to do further training. However, the head teacher may also be able to take on some of the tasks, as these sometimes overlap for schools. Staff also need training, although specific training is optional. However, it is worth sensitizing staff to treat all library users in a friendly, courteous and equal manner. If there is a larger proportion of more challenging people in the community (e.g., homeless people or drug addicts), staff need to be trained to deal with these people fairly and equitably too (Koontz and Gubbin 2010: 50). It must be clear that all people are welcome to use the library's resources.

Further reading

Following the standard guide, a list of sources is given which contains further library information and can assist in the development and management of the library.

Conclusion

The standard guide for school and public libraries is certainly not complete. This is not even possible due to the heterogeneity of the institutions in the different countries. However, the guide provides a basis which should have a motivating effect for a library project. Those who dedicate themselves to the project of building a library should not be faced with a mountain of almost unsolvable problems right at the beginning and be tempted to give up. The guide should reduce this mountain many times over and show that much can be achieved even with little.

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