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# **Bridging the Gap and Improving Access to Libraries and Information in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Globally the issue of public health crisis has become major concern due to emergence of new COVID-19 pandemic. African communities require information and support during difficult times. Libraries have always had the potential to respond to any health challenge that occurred and bedeviled humanity. They play a vital role in a process that provides solutions during critical times. The COVID-19 pandemic outcome has led to changes in library service strategy particularly the social role of libraries in their communities. This paper focuses on new service model for community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa for effective response to global health emergency. It offers innovative library perspectives towards COVID-19 pandemic with special emphasis on service patterns for breaking barriers and improving access to libraries and information. The paper explores provisional closure of

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libraries, changes in circulation policy and provision of most trusted information. It recommends that African librarians should engage in humanitarian projects through collaborative research and practice that would enhance quality of life in the region during and after COVID-19 crisis.

## INTRODUCTION

The entire global population has witnessed a critical moment due to the emergence of Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19). The virus is a deadly new disease outbreak that was initially detected in late 2019. Within a short time, the disease became prevalent and a major preoccupation globally. Yi-Chi, Ching-Sung, and Yu-Jiun (2020) pointed out that the virus emerged in late December 2019 from Wuhan, China, as a novel coronavirus. It was officially recognized and declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on February 11, 2020. The disease presents a serious danger to global public health and economic security. People infected by COVID-19 are expected to seek verified information from relevant sources and equally seek medical attention. Symptoms of the disease are categorized by WHO (2020a) as follows:

Most Common Symptoms	Less Common Symptoms	Symptoms of Severe COVID – 19	Other Less Common Symptoms
1. Fever	1. Loss of taste or smell,	1. Shortness of breath,	1. Irritability,
2. Dry cough	2. Nasal congestion,	2. Loss of appetite,	2. Confusion,
3. Fatigue	3. Conjunctivitis (also known as red eyes)	3. Confusion,	3. Reduced consciousness (sometimes associated with seizures),
	4. Sore throat,	4. Persistent pain or pressure in the chest,	4. Anxiety,
	5. Headache,	5. High temperature (above 38°C).	5. Depression,
	6. Muscle or joint pain,		6. Sleep disorders,
	7. Different types of skin rash,		7. More severe and rare neurological complications such as strokes, brain inflammation, delirium and nerve damage.
	8. Nausea or vomiting,		
	9. Diarrhea,		
	10. Chills or dizziness.		

Source: WHO (2020a)

At the time of public health concerns, difficulties and information inequality, libraries are expected to offer helping hand by coming forward to show their support and provide real impact. Information inequality in Africa is one of the major setbacks for building strong communities, sustainable programs and development. The possible roots for this challenge were mostly access and affordability gaps. There are disparities in literacy rate and income. Many people, especially in the rural areas have limited or no access to information systems such as libraries and online utilities like media archives, databases and

repositories. In addition, a significant number of the population cannot afford print media on daily basis and weekly let alone technology devices such as computers, tablets, smart phones or perhaps mobility cost from rural areas to urban centres in order to use libraries and other information infrastructures. This is particularly due to poverty and other socio-economic and educational conditions. Schoch and Lakner (2020) report that there has been slow progress in sub-Saharan Africa due to rising number of poor people. The development not only impacted the continent but also global extreme poverty reduction.

Urban and rural communities are central to Africa's development. While this position is recognized there is need for reconsideration of the role of libraries, information services, policies and models during global health crisis. Over the years, libraries have been extending their traditional operations by empowering communities to stay safe and healthy when there is terrible public health crisis such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, cholera, flu and at times devastation due to life threatening diseases like cancer. These detrimental health conditions have the potential to undermine progress particularly in less developed countries. Nwafor-Orizu, Umannakwe and Onwudinjo (2018) opine that librarians should provide health information and literacy skills for meaningful living. This will empower communities to feel connected and more resilient through hard times like critical health emergencies.

The current global library trend on emergency situations indicates that library services are becoming integral part of the solution to critical circumstances. This scenario depicts the changing role of librarianship that entails not only information gatekeeping but taking different direction and extending services beyond library walls. The response of libraries across the world during pandemic clearly shows their unity against any health challenge that will emerge and bedevil humanity. Accordingly, many health concerns will be addressed to a desired level by using the services of libraries and librarians since they are free and open to people in addition to partaking in building a healthy community (Morgan, 2016).

It is worthwhile and desirable for community libraries in Africa to keep to the philosophy of global solidarity. This will involve commitment to providing services for the sake of humanitarian interest to confront global public health crisis. Mulindwa (2015) observes that libraries have been supporting their respective countries in different ways. Librarians have been making effort to connect service workers like educators, environmentalists, agriculture and health care professionals to information in order to improve the lives of their community members.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the community in which library is situated is an important component of consideration when implementing library services on COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of health

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emergency a new library service model should be introduced. The service plan should be inclusive and capable of deploying all the resources available to salvage people from pandemic situation. Community library sector should ensure positive response to pandemic condition by offering information resources, facilities, services and assistance to their target populations. This role will particularly support communities to determine and solve any existing constraint posed by the pandemic thereby making informed decisions. A successful service model at the time of responding to powerful universal pandemic like COVID-19 will require mobilization of community library networks and service outlets in view of their proximity to grassroots and underserved populations. Community library service outlets and networks are useful channels of ensuring grassroots knowledge, accessibility to basic services and assistance at a general or specific context of COVID-19 emergency.

## COMMUNITY LIBRARY INITIATIVES IN SOME COUNTRIES OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Community libraries are specifically established to serve as service-oriented systems that provide resources, services and programs based on the need of their communities. They serve as sources of information, recreation, community engagement and development. They require staff with specific skills and training to deliver pro-active services to various segments of the community. Obviously, community libraries are viewed as distinct types of public libraries or alternative to public libraries that supply miscellaneous materials and empower community through information service for the growth of the community and raising their quality of life (Mia, 2020 and Mostert, 1998).

The importance of community libraries has been recognized in African societies. For example, Leonard and Ngula (2013) conducted a study to determine the role of community libraries in Maxwilili community, Namibia. The authors agree that community libraries are critical interface between communities and nation's information services. Their finding revealed that community libraries contribute to the social wellbeing of user groups through literacy classes and counseling services. According to Agyemang (2017) community libraries are many in Ghana and most of them were established by district assemblies and Non-Governmental Organizations. These types of libraries have potential benefits to various user communities. In Nigeria, health information services are central to the provision of community library service. Harande (2009) in Momodu (2012) observed that community libraries provide information on the prevention of different diseases. The libraries collect fact about various health programs and establish connection with community health care centres as well as information dissemination to residence of rural areas.

In Kenya, Kassimu (2003) opined that community-based library initiatives came into being in the early 1990s by Kenya National Library Service (KNLS). This was in response to many formal requests by various communities asking for KNLS to open branch libraries in their areas. Thus, libraries were established solely to

cater for the whole community regardless of gender or age group. However, in countries like Zambia, community information service is provided through public library systems as agents of educational, social, economic and political changes (Lubbungu, 2020). By all accounts therefore, community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa need to be involved in the design and implementation of community-based approaches to address current global health challenges due to their proximity to grassroot level.

#### List of countries in sub-Saharan Africa

Angola	Liberia
Benin	Madagascar
Botswana	Malawi
Burkina Faso	Mali
Burundi	Mauritania
Cape Verde	Mauritius
Cameroon	Mozambique
Central African Republic	Namibia
Chad	Niger
Comoros	Nigeria
Congo, Dem. Rep.	Rwanda
Congo, Rep.	Sao Tome and Principe
Cote d'Ivoire	Senegal
Equatorial Guinea	Seychelles
Eritrea	Sierra Leone
Eswatini	Somalia
Ethiopia	South Africa
Gabon	South Sudan
Gambia, The	Sudan
Ghana	Tanzania
Guinea	Togo
Guinea-Bissau	Uganda
Kenya	Zambia
Lesotho	Zimbabwe

Source: World Bank (2020)

## PROVISIONAL CLOSURE OF LIBRARIES AND CHANGES IN CIRCULATION POLICY DUE TO PANDEMIC

The sub-Saharan Africa occupies an area of the African continent that lies south of the Sahara. Countries in the region were reported to have made progress in their effort to stop the spread of COVID-19. According to Moeti (2020) thirteen countries in sub-Saharan Africa implemented lockdown measures. These measures have forced organizations such as libraries to totally closed their doors or provide partial services. The implementation of lockdown restrictions in sub-Saharan Africa was considered essential by authorities for the purpose of public health safety. For example, Botswana implemented a

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28 – day lockdown period as a measure against COVID-19. During this time, empty streets were seen with very limited economic activity due to antivirus measures in the country. (Masisi, 2020 and Xinhua, 2020).

In Nigeria, interstate movement was restricted and businesses closed because of curfew. The country's Ministry of Education orders closure of all schools operating in Nigeria as a measure to contain the situation. These schools comprised primary, secondary and tertiary institutions (Adedigba, 2020). The Ugandan government approved lockdown measures by banning vehicles movement, public gatherings, shutting down shopping centres, places of worship, schools, entertainment centres and putting in place a night time curfew (Lirri, 2020). Also, Ghana imposes partial lockdown in Greater Accra advising people to stay at home during the restriction period. The African Press Agency (2020) reported that intercity movement of vehicles and aircraft were halted except for the purpose of essential services in the affected area. Similarly, lockdown measures and regulations were announced in countries like Kenya, Angola, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Lockdown measures and curfew forced libraries to introduced new policies regarding their operations. These policies include temporary closure, provision of partial services, extension of due date of books and review of charges of late return materials. As a result of these conditions, users at some point have no access to physical library collections, browsing library shelves and on-site utilization of items. IFLA (2020) stated that various types of libraries have stopped offering programs which will attract people to spend longer periods together. Libraries have temporarily discontinued programs that will bring together people who are more vulnerable to the disease. Library events, programs and services were halted until further notice due to pandemic. Often, libraries provide update regarding their services to their communities at an appropriate time.

## **PROVISION OF MOST TRUSTED INFORMATION TO COMMUNITIES**

A serious danger to public health awareness effort in the information society is the effect of disinformation, misinformation and fake news. Libraries are always concerned about the influence of disinformation, misinformation and fake news. Disinformation is seen as a deliberate attempt to provide fabricated, misleading, biased or sometimes manipulative account or information. On the other hand, misinformation denotes a situation where untrue or false information is spread among the population regardless of whether there is intent to deceive the public. While fake news arises from false or misleading information strategically presented as genuine.

In view of the availability of technology devices such as smart phones and tablets as well as the growing online networking, people develop stories and put them up online for wider public consumption. Therefore, libraries are engaged in battling the effect of disinformation, misinformation and fake news among the populace during pandemic. A very sensitive area is the sharing of unconfirmed fact about symptoms of COVID-19 disease, method of testing, prevention and treatment. This type of news come from multiple sources like social media, websites, blogs and possibly through conversation or phone call by friend or family member. Lund and Long (2022) observe that societies have witnessed substantial divides at the time of COVID-19 pandemic. These divides especially relate to people's understanding and acceptance of "preventive measures like social distancing, mask wearing, good hygiene and vaccination as well as access to and ability to parse through accurate information about the disease." In consideration of this circumstance, it is high time that libraries should provide verifiable information which community members will rely upon in order to make certain judgment or form their own opinion regarding health issues. Community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa are expected to support their constituencies and improve their understanding and perspective on COVID-19 pandemic.

Information is a valuable commodity during crisis whereas access to it is critical to ensuring safety. Africa is vulnerable to disinformation, misinformation and fake news due to low literacy level. It seems there were several misleading remarks by the members of the public regarding COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these commentaries include unverified statements regarding precautionary measures and treatment of the virus. An encouraging development was initiated amidst this scenario by African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AFLIA). The development aims at addressing the effect of disinformation, misinformation and fake news during pandemic. It provides a platform for African librarians to acquire essential Media and Information Literacy skills that could be used in their work places and beyond to curb the spread of disinformation, misinformation and fake news on COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020b and AFLIA, 2020).

The work of community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa during pandemic is to assist the public to find and evaluate COVID-19 information sources. This activity includes selecting appropriate information sources like social media, databases, websites, blogs, directories, search engines and perhaps weighing the quality of news emanating from radio and television stations. In this respect, libraries assist the public to assess the quality of COVID-19 information by confirming its authenticity, accuracy and reliability. At this point, libraries assist the public to prove the genuine of the source of information or in other respect.

## INTRODUCTION OF NEW SERVICE MODEL: BRIDGING ACCESS GAP

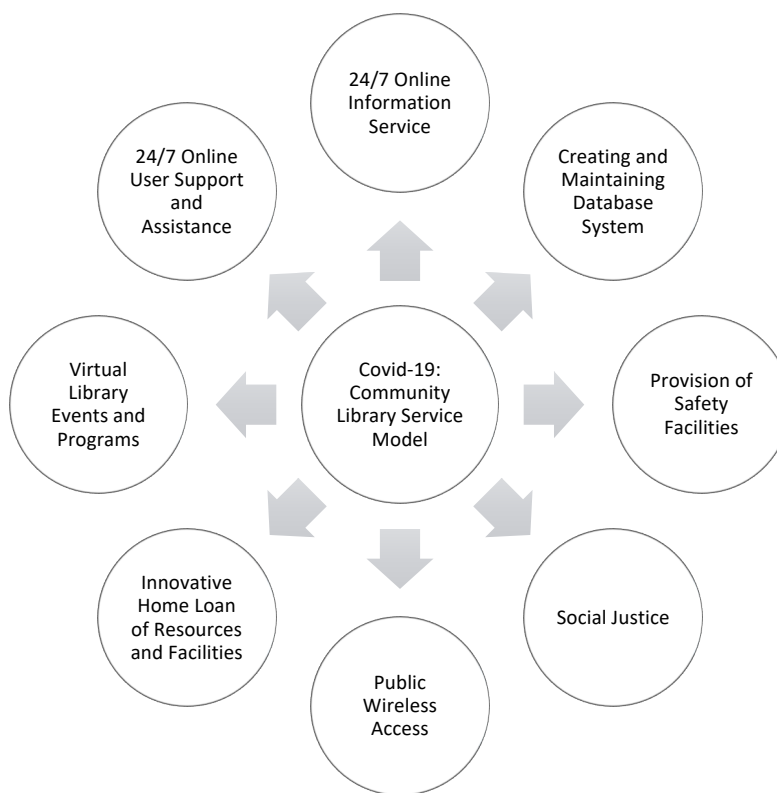
An emerging global challenge like COVID-19 crisis has opened a new era of providing groundbreaking library and information services. The best possible option for community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa during and after pandemic is to provide innovative library and information services in order to break any barrier and improve access. However, due to critical condition and the impact of the pandemic people will not be able to use library physical spaces. At the time of the pandemic people stay indoors in adherence to confinement order enacted by authorities. This has giving rise to a new digital behaviour that accelerates working and access to services remotely. Libraries consider this development as a favourite solution of meeting the demands of community members including those at the greatest need of essential information services. These services basically take into account the following populations:

<b>S/N</b>	<b>User Populations</b>	<b>Establishing Contact</b>
Category 1.	COVID 19 Committees and working groups such as government officials and decision makers	Workplace address, email, phone numbers, social media contacts
Category 2.	Health officials, social welfare workers and volunteers	Workplace address, email, phone numbers, social media contacts
Category 3.	General public such as individuals, families, businesses and associations.	Street address, email, phone numbers, social media contacts

It is evident that community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa are really facing challenges pertaining to resources, facilities and advanced technology. But their leadership role at the time of health and safety emergencies is needed. This paper is advocating that African communities require information and support during health emergencies. For the purpose of service delivery, libraries require demographic data about their communities such as population density, gender stratification, ratio of adults and children, religious and market places. Where there are reports on severe cases of health concerns libraries should obtain data on people permission and hours allowed for mobility during lockdown. It is essential that all aspect of library services regarding pandemic will make a difference and should adequately cover large scale COVID-19 issues. This will ensure remarkable success in the fight against the prevalent condition.

The following model is hereby presented for community library and information centres in sub-Saharan Africa:





Covid-19: Community Library Service Model

The foregoing community library service model contains eight service patterns. These patterns would adequately be used by community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa to provide services during and after pandemic. The period that emerged after the pandemic was tagged as new normal due to transformations associated with COVID-19. However, adoption and use of the proposed library service patterns can be put into effect through the application of key activity under each pattern below:

Library Service Pattern	Key Activity
1) 24/7 online information services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information on preventive measures/safety guidelines.</li> <li>• Information on COVID-19 symptoms.</li> <li>• Information on the number of new cases.</li> <li>• Information on the number of diagnosed cases.</li> <li>• Information on the number of recoveries.</li> <li>• Information on reported death cases.</li> </ul>
2) 24/7 online user support and assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information on stay at home campaign and adherence to lockdown rules and instructions in the areas affected.</li> <li>• Information on access to testing kits.</li> <li>• Information on access to professional help, referral and helpful links.</li> <li>• Tips on social distancing and self-isolation.</li> </ul>

- Information on quarantine centres.
  - Information on designated hospitals and Ambulance service.
  - Information on emergency food response such as free meal and nutrition guide.
  - Helping homeless people, those on interstate migration and stranded tourists.
  - Supporting refugees and Internally Displaced Persons against risk of contracting COVID-19 in conflict areas.
  - Providing interpreters and sign language for persons with disability and promote their freedom.
- 3) Virtual library events and programs
- Organizing information and media literacy programs to contain fake news and misinformation.
  - Organizing online lectures and live webinars.
  - Facilitating distance learning and working from home in collaboration with schools, agencies and institutions.
  - Special family engagement program for the children, men, women and most vulnerable households.
- 4) Innovative home loan of resources and facilities
- Lending of Laptops.
  - Lending of Tablet computers.
  - Lending of e-books, audio and video collections.
- 5) Public wireless access
- Free public Wi-Fi services.
  - Digital support services
- 6) Social Justice
- Information on cautions against human rights abuse during COVID-19 lockdown period.
- 7) Provision of safety facilities
- Facilitating access to free hand sanitizers, disinfectants, soaps and cleaners.
  - Facilitating access to free face masks and protective outfits.
- 8) Creating and maintaining database system
- Maintaining general information (full text, bibliographies, indexes and abstracts) on COVID-19 pandemic including examples from other parts of the world for future reference.

## CONCLUSION

Community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa have the potential role in the front line of response to global COVID-19 crisis. Libraries in sub-Saharan Africa are expected to engage themselves in meaningful connections with their communities by providing them with new library services in order to address the serious health crisis posed by the pandemic situation. Also, looking at the progress recorded in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, several countries started relaxing the lockdown measures. The WHO being the apex health institution advises countries in the region to exercise caution in their attempt to

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reopen activities. It recommends that effective testing and surveillance systems must be put in place particularly in places of public gatherings.

## WAY FORWARD

This paper establishes the following guidelines and recommendations as the way forward for community libraries in sub-Saharan Africa for effective operations and service delivery during and after pandemic:

- 1) Governments and stakeholders in sub-Saharan Africa should equip community libraries with adequate modern facilities and resources that would be used to implement COVID-19 library service model during and after pandemic.
- 2) New library operation hours should be announced to health officials, researchers and general public.
- 3) Health care packages like infrared thermometer should be provided to screen users at points of entry into the library.
- 4) Community libraries should professionally guide their users on sharing opinion and experiences on COVID-19 online.
- 5) Libraries should clean computer keyboards, mouse and other audio-visual materials using sanitizers and disinfectants.
- 6) Users should be made to observe proper hand hygiene before and after touching surfaces.
- 7) Capacity development of librarians on COVID-19 and other health related matters should be encouraged and provided on regular basis in order to ensure a sustain change.

African librarians should engage in collaborative research that would enhance quality of life during and after COVID-19 pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa.

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