



Challenges and impacts of the absence of public libraries in rural South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the adverse consequences of rural communal inaccessibility to a free public library. Making educated judgments to accomplish growth-oriented and educational objectives requires having access to accurate and pertinent information. Public libraries support the development of society and the economy by providing information necessary for informed engagement in societal activities, such as gaining entry to prospects. Fifty individuals were chosen using purposeful selection from various classifications in the rural areas of Kwa-Mhlanga, Mpumalanga, South Africa, as part of the study's qualitative research methodology. Discussion groups and organized interviews were used to gather data, which were subsequently subjected to thematic analysis. Rural communities around Kwa-Mhlanga have an acute requirement for a public library. The community's educational, socioeconomic, cultural, and economic prosperity is adversely impacted when education, knowledge, and supporting resources are unavailable. To satisfy the information demands of the many populations that comprise the town, the study suggests the creation of a public library that is adequately equipped, kept up to date, and constantly updated. The villages that encompass Kwa-Mhlanga should organize a community group to advocate for the opening of a public library or library facility, work with nearby schools to enhance library materials and promote community utilization after class hours, and work with neighbourhood organizations to set up a mobile library that delivers books and resources to different parts of the community.

Keywords: information needs; public library; rural area; south africa

1. INTRODUCTION

Public libraries, especially public and community libraries, are symbols for spreading information that fosters social integration and tranquillity in neighbourhoods. They allow people to exchange ideas and come together in a shared space, often supported by communal assets and historical information (Panda & Das, 2023). Public libraries have long been important to society because they offer open places and fair access to educational materials, information, interpersonal relationships, and leisure activities (Bouaamri, 2023; Kumar, 2023). They similarly promote autonomous and organized study in every aspect of education (Balapanidou, 2015). Information centres and libraries are essential to the advancement of communities, security, freedom, and enlightenment (Muchaonyerwa et al., 2021).

In this regard, public libraries are among the leading organizations that support internet accessibility given they provide free internet access, train members of society in digital competencies, develop and establish digital services readily accessible, and bring out a range of digital inclusiveness initiatives, (Real, 2021; Strover et al., 2020). However, implementing digital inclusiveness plans is difficult, and public libraries could have difficulty reaching their intended audience, adapting their offerings, and ensuring the long-term viability of these initiatives (Kulikauskienė & Šaparnienė, 2023). By giving residents access to necessary information, public

libraries are social institutions that are essential to the growth and development of the community (Maurya, 2016).

This is accurate, given that information availability is essential to both personal and community growth (Mugwisi et al., 2016). For approximately a century, instructional technology has been sold as an innovative technique for education as it could enhance education and the educational process for learners, which finally increases learning outcomes (Sanfo & Malgoubri, 2023). To build learning throughout public education that is systematically structured in innovation inside the instruction, education participants need to learn increasingly fully, quickly, efficiently, and aggressively (Mursid et al., 2021).

Rural students often face challenges such as a limited supply of technology, unstable connectivity to the internet, and low proficiency in technology, each of which exacerbates educational inequalities (Mahwasane & Mudzielwana, 2016; Tamakloe, 2014; Xu, 2024). The need for information is ubiquitous throughout many cultures and societies, and it is an essential part of daily life. Information has become even more important in today's world, which is fast-paced and constantly changing. Library facilities and knowledge dissemination have contributed to the acknowledgement of information as an instrument that is essential to global economic and social growth, according to Leonard and Ngula (2013).

In addition to the educational significance of culture, public libraries play a critical role in the regional economy by supplying information and materials that facilitate the revitalization and expansion of the regional economy (Soliman & Wei, 2016). Public libraries exert a socioeconomic influence and help the economy grow by offering tools for businesspeople, making employment portals accessible, and delivering professional growth offerings (Aabø, 2011). Rural communities are more likely to be unemployed and illiterate due to a lack of libraries (Raju & Raju, 2010).

Establishing public libraries in remote areas and acknowledging the urgent need to solve these issues can significantly improve rural communities' general growth and living standards. The establishment of public libraries in countryside regions can help close the accessibility gap to educational and informational resources while simultaneously boosting local economies (Otolu, 2022). Several obstacles indeed make it difficult to establish public libraries in remote locations.

The marginalization of rural areas during the reign of apartheid is mostly to blame for the persistent problems with public library service, especially in South Africa (Bopape et al., 2021). To address society's information demands, Mohammed (2019) and Mamman (2015) fervently support enough funding from the government for the establishment of public libraries. Learning opportunities are hampered, and a lack of knowledge is created by the absence of readily available library services in rural locations.

Through examining the variables influencing the availability of public libraries in the rural parts bordering Kwa-Mhlanga, the study seeks to close this research gap. The lack of a public library in the rural regions neighbouring Kwa-Mhlanga makes it extremely difficult for the locals to achieve their aspirations in life. Sambo (2018) argued that the absence of a public library in remote regions makes it more difficult for the locals to achieve their goals in terms of schooling, job prospects, security, wellness, and pleasure.

Understanding the effects of the community's lack of a public library, identifying the obstacles to its implementation, and figuring out the success criteria required for its formation are all urgently needed. The rural communities around Kwa-Mhlanga will continue to be at a disadvantage if these issues are not resolved, as they will be unable to fully utilize the advantages that a public library can offer in fostering literacy, knowledge acquisition, community involvement, and cultural preservation.

Despite the importance of public libraries for social and economic development, most rural towns lack one. Rural residents frequently struggle to get the information they need, which harms the community. To offer useful insights and recommendations for establishing a public library, a thorough examination is necessary. By examining the difficulties and effects of the absence of a public library and offering thorough recommendations for the effective establishment of a public

library in a rural area, this study seeks to solve information discrepancies and improve the overall health of the rural communities surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga. The study aims to clarify the information needs of the community and the possible advantages that a public library might offer by analysing the effects of its absence.

1.1 Information needs of the rural community

In their daily lives, people exhibit a variety of information needs. Reitz (2010) states that an information need is defined as a knowledge gap that, when consciously recognized as a query, inspires a person to look for an answer. People look for pertinent information after determining their information needs. The literature emphasizes information as a vital resource for national development.

Islam and Ahmed (2012) emphasise that knowledge is catalyzed by information, and the degree of knowledge within a community is closely related to its development. Accordingly, knowledge is essential to a community's development, and knowledge can only be acquired by a community that acknowledges and utilizes information as a tool for advancement (Kamba, 2009). In rural areas, having access to relevant information is essential for gaining the knowledge, abilities, and self-assurance needed to actively participate in community activities. Information is essential to the growth of both individuals and communities (Islam & Ahmed, 2012). People use information to take control of their everyday lives, succeed in business, enhance their cultural experiences, and develop their potential through education and training.

The information demands of rural communities are as diverse as the people who live there. Lwoga et al. (2010) argue that information demands are strongly related to a person's occupation, social and economic development level, and the surrounding agroecological circumstances. The information demands of people living in rural areas are therefore linked to their jobs and basic survival goals (Islam & Ahmed, 2012). Mtega (2012) emphasises that physiological demands must give rise to fundamental and frequently exchanged information. These specific information requirements can be influenced by several variables, including social, cultural, and economic circumstances.

Information needs can be influenced by factors such as age, income, gender, and educational attainment (Lwoga et al., 2011; Masinde et al., 2020). Notably, a variety of social, ethnic, societal, and economic aspects contribute to the unique information demands of rural communities (Lwoga et al., 2011). The varied demands of rural areas also include specialized services for various demographics and require electronic government services, including online employment forms, university acceptances, birth enrollments, copying, printing purposes, and teleconferencing (Hoq, 2014; Matodzi, 2018). Schrag et al. (2015) postulate that evaluating how public libraries affect users' lives might help us better understand the information demands of different populations in rural regions.

These requirements cover everything from climate and currency rates to daily information on the neighbourhood (Mittal et al., 2018). Free newspapers and reliable information on government, good health, and education are available at libraries. In the case of rural areas, in which resources are frequently scarce, it becomes imperative to guarantee a free and dependable internet connection (Bopape et al., 2017).

1.2 Role of public libraries in rural areas

Particularly in rural regions, public libraries have developed into social and cultural hubs that provide a wealth of information (Lal, 2018). Public libraries supplement formal education systems by offering a range of resources and instructional programmes, such as technological devices, literature, and workshops for learning (Bouaamri et al., 2022). From kids looking for homework assistance to adults seeking opportunities for lifelong learning, these tools serve students of all ages (Bertot et al., 2016).

To improve learning outcomes in remote communities, public libraries frequently work with nearby schools and educational institutions (Hart, 2021). In rural public libraries, pupils and communities have immediate access to library workers who can assist and mentor them more

effectively (Bopape et al., 2021). Rural isolation and inadequate connectivity to the internet can limit knowledge dissemination in rural areas. By providing free access to a range of information resources, such as books, newspapers, periodicals, and internet-based databases, public libraries help close this gap (Agyekum et al., 2016).

Rural libraries have taken on the additional responsibility of offering high-speed internet connections, which are frequently difficult to come by outside of urban regions (Maja & Motseke, 2022). By offering help with retrieving data as well as instruction in technological proficiency, public libraries strengthen people living in rural areas and promote information independence and self-reliance (Bertot et al., 2016). Libraries foster social cohesiveness by bringing people together through a variety of programmes and events, including reading clubs, social gatherings, and cultural displays (Hart, 2021).

Public libraries frequently function as multifunctional venues for neighbourhood meetings, get-togethers, and events (Barclay, 2017), enhancing the resilience and liveliness of rural communities (Vårheim, 2017). By providing a friendly and accessible atmosphere for all patrons, regardless of socioeconomic background or status, public libraries help reduce social barriers and advance inclusivity, which in turn promotes social inclusion and equity (Bertot et al., 2016).

To address specific needs and improve social fairness, libraries frequently provide specialized services for disadvantaged communities (Olatoye et al., 2021). Examples of these services include literacy programmes for immigrants and outreach programmes for the elderly (Stilwell, 2016). In remote areas, mobile libraries often use cars to deliver books, digital resources, and community programmes (Whelan, 2014). Libraries and villages work together to tailor services to each community's particular requirements.

This could include cultural events that engage locals, technology education, and literacy programmes (McCook, 2000). To improve their resources and accessibility, successful rural libraries frequently work with local governments, nonprofits, and educational institutions. These collaborations could increase revenue and enhance programming (Lankers, 2016).

1.3 Challenges in the provision of public libraries in rural areas

The lack of sufficient financial and human resources is one of the main obstacles to the establishment of public libraries in remote areas (Mia, 2020). In many rural places, these resources are scarce or given priority over other urgent needs. Strand (2016) emphasises that funding limitations make it extremely difficult to start and continue public library services in rural locations. While distributing funds for the operation of public libraries, the government and pertinent ministries do not consider this (Lehman, 2014). Budget cuts brought on by economic volatility frequently impair libraries' capacity to offer high-quality services (Guarria & Wang, 2011).

Financing for personnel, facilities, collection expansion, and operating costs presents a major challenge to the availability of public libraries in rural locations. Due to lower property prices, lower average earnings, and a larger percentage of retired people, rural communities might not generate enough tax revenue to fund public library operations (Holt, 2009). Socioeconomic variables also contribute to the low demand for library services in areas with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy (Bopape et al., 2021). Libraries may not be valued by those who are struggling to meet their necessities, which could result in poor patronage and support for their establishment.

Another barrier to the establishment of public libraries in remote locations is a lack of infrastructure. Appropriate structures or areas that can be converted for library usage are lacking in many rural towns. Finding or creating places that satisfy the requirements of a contemporary library is difficult in remote locations due to a lack of suitable infrastructure (Mamabolo & Durodolu, 2023). The effective implementation of library services depends on integrated road infrastructure (Mahwasane, 2008). Reliable infrastructure for communications is essential for providing library and information services in a digital age.

However, Mosert and Nthetha (2008) state that traditionally underserved rural communities frequently lack sufficient infrastructure to connect to the Internet. Less than 10% of South African families have internet access at home, according to Statistics South Africa (2012), underscoring the stark disparity in internet accessibility. Accessing online databases and information resources is made extremely difficult by the lack of telecommunications infrastructure in many rural locations (Mojapelo, 2014). Users are denied the chance to make use of worldwide electronic information if there is inadequate infrastructure.

Constructing public libraries in remote places is particularly difficult due to the low population density. It is difficult to defend the return on investment in library construction and resources when there is a low population density because there are fewer potential library customers (Bertot et al., 2016). Operational expenses and logistical difficulties arise when serving a scattered population over large geographic areas (Ismael & Ngah, 2011). Rural settlements may be underserved as a result of policymakers giving priority to regions with larger population densities.

Providing library services to remote locations is made more difficult by the digital divide. According to Bertot et al. (2016), differences in digital literacy and internet access are more pronounced in rural populations than in urban ones. Rural populations' ability to take advantage of web-based amenities and digital library materials is hampered by their limited access to technology and high-speed internet (Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022; Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). Targeted investments in digital literacy initiatives and infrastructure for broadband are necessary to close the digital divide (Hollman et al., 2021).

However, these investments may not be available in rural areas because of resource limitations (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Professionals with the requisite training and experience are frequently hard to find in rural libraries. It is challenging to properly staff rural libraries due to a lack of employment options, poorer pay, and fewer prospects for professional growth (Ndebele et al., 2016). Rural libraries may, therefore, run with fewer staff members or depend more on volunteers, which could affect the calibre and range of services they can provide. (Real & Rose, 2017).

Thus, the aforementioned difficulties demonstrate the complex barriers that must be overcome to guarantee the construction of public libraries in rural regions.

1.4 Impact of the absence of public libraries in rural areas

Rural libraries have long been crucial for literacy development, particularly in areas with limited access to formal schooling, according to Bertot et al. (2016). Jiyane and Sokhela (2023) postulate that public libraries have a major impact on educational achievements. This impact extends beyond a person's academic achievement and has wider societal ramifications for developing an informed, capable, and educated populace. The lack of public libraries can significantly restrict access to learning and information resources, especially in rural locations where other resources may be limited. The use of information sources and services in rural Nigerian libraries is examined by Garaba and Mohammed (2019), who highlight how these resources aid in educational endeavours.

Pupils and continuous learners in rural locations may encounter major obstacles in their educational journeys if they do not have access to the varied books, journals, and digital resources that libraries offer. Poorer levels of literacy, lower scores in school, and a growing educational divide between rural and urban areas can all be consequences of this restriction. Public libraries are vital community hubs that offer access to a wide range of resources and services, including digital technologies; their dearth in rural regions has an impact on the economy as well. They are beyond simply places to store books (Abu et al., 2011). Rural communities' economic development can be greatly aided by these resources and services.

Rural residents may encounter obstacles to job prospects and economic mobility if they do not have access to these resources. A lack of libraries could discourage companies from making investments in rural areas, hence sustaining economic inequality. In remote locations, the lack of public libraries can further exacerbate social isolation, which can have serious repercussions for

both individuals and communities. Bouaamri et al. (2022) state that public libraries are essential community centres that offer social interaction and information access. Rural libraries serve as hubs for social wellness, gap-closing, and community participation (Dent, 2014).

In rural places, their absence makes social isolation worse. Locals lose out on networking chances, seminars, and social occasions. Public libraries are crucial social organizations that promote social inclusion and assist educational systems (Bouaamri et al., 2022). Social isolation may worsen in rural locations due to the lack of these institutions. Rural dwellers may feel cut off from their fellow citizens and the outside world in the absence of a centralized location for access to knowledge and interaction between communities (Stilwell, 2016).

A lack of social connections and links can lead to isolation and loneliness, which can have a serious negative influence on one's mental and overall health (Philbin et al., 2019). According to Mohammed (2019), public libraries are essential for maintaining cultural norms and values. This emphasizes how important it is for public libraries to gather information sources that communicate and record the cultural legacy of the rural areas they serve. Therefore, the preservation of culture suffers greatly when public libraries are absent from rural areas.

Public libraries' community records are essential for maintaining local memories and identities in rural areas (Bertot et al., 2016). Public libraries are still essential, even in the digital age, especially for people living in rural areas who depend on them to obtain knowledge that helps them preserve and promote their cultural heritage (Matodzi, 2018). However, this goal is undermined by the dearth of public libraries in rural areas, creating a gap in attempts to preserve culture. In a world that is becoming more digital, having access to technological devices and internet networks is essential.

Public libraries play a vital role in closing the digital divide by offering free internet, computers, and digital literacy programmes (Bertot et al., 2016). However, individuals in rural areas without libraries might not have access to necessary digital resources, exacerbating existing inequalities in digital expertise and technological access (Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022). One major factor contributing to the technological gap in rural areas is the lack of public libraries. Information and communication technology (ICT) access, ICT literacy, and information literacy training are all provided by public libraries.

Public libraries also help to support and encourage information sharing and communication between the public and the government (Mphidi, 2016). This divide is complex and can take the form of internal inequalities where some people are digitally empowered while others are not (Sheik, 2017). Due to a lack of support and the high expense of establishing technological facilities in rural areas, efforts to close the digital divide face challenges (Rowell et al., 2017). Due to obstacles such as topographical hurdles in hilly locations and a lack of a sustainable client base to support investment, telecommunications operators are hesitant to expand operations to rural areas (Matodzi, 2018).

2. METHODS

For this research, the use of qualitative methods was judged appropriate for several reasons. First and foremost, the scope of the study challenge required a thorough examination and comprehension of the phenomenon being studied. Investigating intricate phenomena and producing fresh ideas and hypotheses is made possible by qualitative research (Brinkmann, 2018; Babbie, 2013). The study's use of a qualitative methodology allowed it to capture the rich, deep descriptions and personal significance related to this intricate social issue of rural communities' absence of public libraries and how it affects community development (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

The people who live in the rural areas of Kwa-Mhlanga and for whom a public library is intended to provide services make up the target audience of this study. As a result, depending on the study's geographic and subject scope, the population of this research includes a wide range of individuals from various backgrounds, including adults, youth, adolescents, children, and older

persons. Purposive sampling was used to choose fifty participants from a variety of categories in the rural areas of Kwa-Mhlanga. Focus groups and organized interviews were used to gather data, which were subsequently subjected to thematic examination.

To gain insight into various individual responses, the researchers consulted personal notes recorded during and after focus groups and interviews, as well as transcribed and translated their findings into English (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Atlas.ti (version 8) software was used to analyze the data using thematic analysis. Effective data management and a more thorough investigation of the significance of recorded data were made possible by the use of Atlas.ti software (Manyerere, 2015). The processing and evaluation of various media formats, including text, photos, videos, and audio, were made possible by Atlas.ti (Wästerfors et al., 2014).

It was utilized in the current investigation to bring in sources, code, and analyze data using categories and nodes, giving the study's findings an understandable visual representation. With the use of this programme, themes in the data may be described and tested more easily, and patterns that might not be visible through manual analysis can be found. To determine the similarities and variations in the research participants' perspectives on the research questions, the replies were analyzed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Successful models of rural library implementation

Effective rural library implementation methods have become essential tools for improving literacy, fostering community involvement, and granting information access in underprivileged communities. Community involvement, resource accessibility, and programming that is specifically designed to address local needs are key components of effective rural library implementation models. Using a community-centric approach, rural libraries concentrate on comprehending and meeting the unique needs of their local communities.

One example of how libraries can successfully serve a variety of user groups by combining community and educational programmes is the Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda, which doubles as a community and school library. The significance of community participation in library programming and decision-making is emphasized by this paradigm (Dent, 2006). The Texas Woman's University School of Library and Information Studies (TWU SLIS), a recognized Hispanic-serving university in Texas, expands the role of libraries by sending librarians into rural areas to collaborate with local leaders and citizens to promote desired and necessary change (Perryman & Jeng, 2019).

Rural public libraries have effectively collaborated with healthcare organizations to carry out health promotion initiatives. The study by Perry et al. (2023) emphasized how rural libraries might support citizen engagement programmes and walking clubs that aim to improve community health outcomes. Libraries can promote social cohesion and solve public health challenges by making the most of their resources. This approach demonstrates how libraries might go beyond their conventional functions to take a leadership position in community health.

Libraries may have a big influence on local government and policymaking by participating in citizen engagement and community development programmes. Rural libraries enable citizens to take an active role in their communities by promoting dialogue and offering materials for civic involvement. It is being demonstrated that this strategy strengthens the library's function as an outreach facility and an agent of social transformation.

Libraries in rural areas can be vital hubs for internet and technology accessibility. Libraries aid in closing the digital gap in rural areas by offering free internet connections and instruction in digital literacy. The idea that rural public libraries are "anchor institutions" highlights how they might improve the availability of digital and organised community internet resources (Alemanne et al., 2011). This concept fortifies the foundation of a community as a whole.

These examples show how rural libraries may serve a variety of purposes in their communities, from community engagement and technological access to education and medical care. Libraries can improve their usefulness and significance as community resources by adjusting to the particular difficulties faced by rural communities.

3.2 Social impact of the absence of public libraries

Rural residents desire fast, accurate, pertinent, and reliable information for long-term rural development (Mohammed & Garaba, 2019). However, the lack of a public library makes it difficult for the residents of the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga to obtain reliable and recognized information. Three students from the surrounding communities stated that the absence of a public library has an impact on their academic performance because most schools lack libraries.

As a result, most students fail to complete their schoolwork because they lack the necessary resources to conduct research, print out images, and compile a portfolio of supporting documentation. To obtain information from a public library, they must travel to other nearby locations, which is expensive and difficult for them because the majority are unemployed. The community's inability to access the internet and WI-FI (wireless fidelity) is another issue.

Because they are unable to take part in school programmes like reading group contests, tutoring via the internet, technology research, the ability to read, and imaginative thinking, pupils are at an unfavourable status. The community's information demands appear to be changing as a result of an elevated rate of unemployment, significant technological advancements, and limited access to information.

Two college pupils from the impacted communities said that to obtain information from a public library, they must go to other nearby locations where there are libraries, which is expensive and difficult for them because most young people are unemployed. Their inability to access WI-FI and the internet is another problem.

Since they are incapable of taking part in educational activities like book club competitions, online tutoring, technology research, literacy initiatives, and creativity applications, students are at a disadvantage. Four grade twelve learners' parents stated that load shedding has significantly changed things because their learners rely on their phones to get information, therefore, signal towers are impacted when there is no power.

Without the backing of a robust public library service to continue when the school system ends, a literacy drive is unsustainable and will not succeed in many countries that are developing (Abu et al., 2011). The absence of a public library in the outlying regions around Kwa-Mhlanga has a detrimental impact on the community since it makes it more difficult for students to obtain an education and inhibits lifelong learning.

A senior citizen emphasised that the absence of a public library has a detrimental impact on the community by impeding access to educational opportunities for young people, discouraging lifelong learning, causing the community to lose out on opportunities for skill development, and contributing to the elevated unemployment and crime rates in their areas.

One of the challenges is the lack of access to information; it appears that community members must use alternate means of information search and acquisition. These strategies incorporate community gatherings, talks on the radio, cell phone networks, referrals from leaders in the community, visiting nearby public libraries, as well as those who have access to internet cafés.

3.3 Education and information literacy implications

There are relatively few cultural and social obstacles to accessing libraries in rural areas because of the locals' strong ties to and pride in the institution (Johnson & Griffis, 2013). Geological considerations can lead to greater physical separation across communities, considering that they are often separated by large distances (Hughes & Boss, 2020).

Meeting spaces, rapid public internet, and personnel who are knowledgeable about the information sources are often only found at libraries. In the rural regions surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga, the absence of a public library negatively impacts social and cultural life. One

community member stated that the absence of a library makes it more difficult for people to interact with one another and prevents the community from undergoing cultural enrichment, resulting in people feeling isolated and alienated.

One member of the affected communities stated that the issue of the absence of libraries for the public in the remote areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga is not being addressed. Public libraries help people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds develop a lifelong appreciation of reading, increase literacy, foster imaginative thinking and creativity, facilitate the use of information and resources, physical as well as digital, bridge the educational gap, and facilitate the transmission of knowledge.

The establishment of public libraries in remote locales can help close the accessibility gap to educational and informational resources while also boosting the local economy, based on a study by Otolu (2022). One of the biggest problems in rural areas is the lack of public libraries. It has significant effects on the local population as well as the general growth of these areas, especially in social, educational, and economic facets.

These effects are one-off occurrences with broad ramifications that may last for generations. This idea shows that the obstacles to establishing a public library in the rural districts around Kwa-Mhlanga are political disagreements, bureaucratic difficulties, infrastructure constraints, and money. The government does not provide funding for the library project in the rural communities surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga, as evidenced by the financial obstacles preventing the establishment of a public library.

A community leader from the affected communities stated that the community believes that the establishment of public libraries in the rural communities bordering Kwa-Mhlanga is not a priority and that people in positions of authority have no say over budgetary decisions. There is not much of an infrastructure barrier that prevents the construction of a library, particularly on the land, because participants from these communities think the government can supply a lot of vacant space.

In response to recent financial shortages, many people from within and outside the librarianship community have argued that public libraries ought to utilize less traditional government subsidies and greater reliance on alternative funding sources. This finding is consistent with the findings of Agosto (2008) and Leach (2006).

3.4 Structural and policy barriers

The implementation of a public library is impacted by unclear regulations and procedures for its creation and operation. This result is consistent with what Omotosho and Okiki (2012) found. It appears that administrative inefficiencies, a lack of a long-term plan, unclear roles and duties, and red tape from various stakeholders all contribute to the implementation's difficulties. If the influence of politics were not taken into account, any study of the issues affecting how a public sector institution runs would be incomplete. Project execution is significantly impacted by politics (Caliste, 2012). Implementing a public library is hampered by drawn-out approval procedures for project ideas and poor cooperation between several government agencies.

Various community leaders from the surrounding rural areas stated that the establishment of a public library in the rural communities surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga is significantly hampered by issues of politics and policy. Public library implementation is hampered by shifting local government priorities, a shortage of political will, and inadequate policy frameworks that encourage library development in remote areas.

A participant from the community stated that "Political unrest or repeated leadership changes cause ongoing endeavours to be disrupted and lead to uneven accord with library initiatives. Incompatible encouragement of library efforts stems from political volatility in leadership, which also fosters the interruption of ongoing projects. There is a disconnect between the goals of policies and their actual application, according to communities, because current policies do not sufficiently address the unique needs of rural areas.

The findings confirm that the absence of public libraries in Kwa-Mhlanga not only impacts access to information but also exacerbates disparities in education and economic opportunity, as predicted in this study. The lack of public libraries in rural South Africa worsens already-existing inequalities in economic opportunity and education while also restricting access to essential information. The study emphasizes how the absence of library services limits access to digital resources, which are becoming more and more crucial in today's information-driven economy, inhibits community development, and lowers literacy rates.

This supports the original problem statement, which claimed that the lack of public libraries in these remote locations greatly exacerbates social and educational disparities.

4. CONCLUSIONS

One of the study's shortcomings is that, because of its unique setting and features, it might not be generalizable outside of the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga. The extent to which the results apply to the broader community may be constrained by the number of samples collected and participant representativeness. Focus group discussions and interviews are two biased data collection techniques that might not adequately represent the multitude of information demands and barriers. The lack of a public library in rural locations significantly hinders community development and information access, increasing educational inequalities and limiting opportunities for professional and personal growth.

Without a dedicated space for learning and resources, residents may struggle to access essential material for purposes of academic, professional, or personal enrichment. This discrepancy could lead to lower literacy rates, less political participation, and ignorance of important social concerns. The absence of a public library deprives the neighbourhood of a hub for cultural and social activities that can improve ties between neighbours and foster a sense of community.

Ultimately, the lack of a library in rural areas hinders the growth of the community as a whole and limits the unlimited possibilities of each individual. The study concludes by confirming the importance of public library establishment for community empowerment, educational advancement, and improving the general standard of living in rural South Africa. Based on the outcomes of the study, it is recommended that the communities that surround Kwa-Mhlanga set up a community group to advocate for the establishment of a public library or library services, as this will demonstrate community involvement in the material that is available.

The surrounding communities should work with nearby educational institutions to enhance library resources and encourage community utilization following school hours; villages should work with regional organizations to establish a mobile library that circulates books and other material to multiple rural community regions; villages ought to put up a designated area in a local business, community centre, or school where its inhabitants can get books plus additional reading materials; and, finally, hold a book change or trade where residents can give away and swap books.

Rural communities are in dire need of a public library since their educational, social, cultural, and economic well-being are all negatively impacted by the absence of a source of information, education, and related support resources. The establishment of a public library may be impacted by outside variables like community dynamics or policy changes. Understanding these constraints is essential for appropriately assessing the study's results in light of its particular scope as well as for guiding and supporting further research initiatives in adjacent fields.

The researchers recommend that the topic of public library provision in rural areas be studied based on the availability of these libraries in these places. Future research can concentrate on how public libraries support digital literacy in rural areas, how rural libraries affect community growth and engagement, and how to evaluate the information demands of rural communities and the function of libraries.

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