

# **The public library as a critical institution in South Africa's democracy: a reflection**

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## **Abstract**

*South Africa came out of apartheid rule in 1994. This transition has brought with it its own set of challenges including that of access to information, an essential pillar in upholding a democracy. In this transitional period, South Africa is reliant on every possible institution to contribute to the growth of its fledgling democracy.*

*It is clearly evident from the literature that democratic societies are dependent on such institutions as public libraries to uphold fundamental principles of democracy. This paper reflects on the public library, within the South African context, as an essential institution in the growth and sustainability of democracy through equitable access to information and knowledge. The paper discusses issues such as the public library and its role in equitable access to information, the contradictory environments within South Africa, recreational reading and the public library scenario, lifelong learning, and the public library and the educational system. Other issues such as support for indigenous materials and adult literacy are also addressed in the paper.*

*The authors conclude that the real concern in South Africa today is the gulf between the "haves", of any colour, and the "have-nots" and the capacity of the public library to bridge that gap via its contribution to the reduction of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment, the scourge of Africa and South Africa. It is a given that public libraries play a critical role in the propagation of democracy, especially in a continent that has been plagued by dictatorships and military rule.*

## **Introduction**

South Africa is now in its fifteenth year of a new political dispensation. It has just elected its fourth president after its national elections which took place in April 2009. The preceding fourteen years, from 1994 to 2008, have seen a majority black political party at the helm of the country for the first time in the history of South Africa. The people of the country are still celebrating this new political democratic order. It is acknowledged that for the first time in the history of this country, everyone has the right to vote. However, one begins to deliberate the authenticity of this new democracy as there is an unacceptably high level of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment and, the country is still ravaged by HIV/Aids and a high infant mortality rate. These are significant issues, as reflected in the literature, negating democracy. How can one exercise an educated and informed vote if one is illiterate? How can one exercise an educated and satisfied vote when one is subjected to abject poverty? How can one exercise an unbiased vote when the only source of income is a minuscule government handout? How can the head of a household exercise the right to vote when s/he is still a minor whose parents are

fallen victims of HIV/Aids?

Kargbo (2004) alludes to the fact that a sound educational system is an indispensable means of “unlocking and protecting ... human rights by providing the scaffolding that is required to secure good health, liberty, security, economic well-being and participation in social and political activity” (Kargbo, 2004, p.1). It would seem that the eradication of the scourges (poverty, unemployment, HIV/Aids, etc.) may be accomplished through the minimization of illiteracy. Illiteracy is viewed as a significant contributor to negating democracy. This is confirmed by Ali (2006), Davis (2005), Hart (2004), Wijetunge (2000) and others with Zapata (1994, p. 124) pointing out that “in democratic societies, illiteracy is an obstacle to full and conscious participation in social and political processes such as elections, control of local or national power and the exercise of public functions. ...knowing how to read and write is a basic prerequisite for practising the right to vote and other rights...”. The positivism of reading and writing, and access to information and knowledge is emphasised by Koneru (2008) who appeals for “societies in which everyone can freely create, access, utilize, share and disseminate information and knowledge, so that individuals, communities and people are empowered to improve their quality of life and to achieve their full potential” (Koneru, 2008, p.1).

South Africa’s democratic government has not demonstrated the necessary prioritization to eradicate illiteracy. It is generally accepted that not much has been done to positively influence the lives of those living below the “poverty level” and for those who are illiterate, and excluded from mainstream employment opportunities. This paper will demonstrate that the public library can serve as a significant medium for the eradication of illiteracy. The low prioritization of public libraries may be attributed to what Anderson (2005) describes as a misinterpretation of them as “a service [that does]...not generate income, [and therefore] provinces tend to regard them as a liability and not a national asset” (Anderson, 2005, p.3).

A large proportion of the South African community has a democracy without empowerment. Atuti (2008) explains that

“empowerment [is] defined as a process that makes it possible for people who are disempowered to exercise power and have more control over their lives. This means having a greater voice in institutions, agencies and situations which affect them. Indeed empowerment emerges from access to information that assists the translation of knowledge to the potential for democratic, social and political action” (Atuti, 2008, p.3).

This reiterates Ali’s (2006, p.153) argument that “poverty is simply a living condition in which an entity is faced with economic, social, political, cultural, educational and environmental deprivation”. Empowerment is the eradication of deprivation, and a significant tool in the empowerment process is information.

It is accepted and confirmed by Atuti (2008) that a significant catalyst in the growth of democracy is access to information. Atuti (2008) argues that if libraries are important sources of information and knowledge for everyone, then libraries are an end in their own right in a democratic society. Given the support in the literature, it would therefore be safe to claim that the public library has a critical role to play in the nurturing and growing of a democracy.

In the same vein as that argued by Atuti, the IFLA (2003) document on the role of libraries in the information society, states that libraries have long been viewed as knowledge institutions because they provide the public with spaces for information and learning and are accessible to all groups of society, regardless of gender, age and ethnic affiliation. This role of the library must be seen against the backdrop of the fact that the development of society and individuals can only be attained through the ability of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society (De la Pena McCook, 2008; Drotner, 2005;

Sturges, 2001). There is no debate with the fact that libraries have rightfully staked their claim as gateways to participation in society through life-long learning and access to information.

This paper will reflect on the public library as an essential pillar of democracy and as a conduit for equitable access to information and knowledge. It will also reflect on the public library's support of South Africa's fledgling democracy. The discussion will center on the public library within the Library and Information Services (LIS) environment in South Africa, addressing such issues as the contradictory environments within the country, recreational reading and the South Africa public library scenario, lifelong learning, and the public library and the educational system. The authors acknowledge that there is a leaning in the discussion towards the role of the public library in propagating democracy from the developing world perspective prevalent in South Africa.

### **Public libraries: an essential pillar in a democracy**

Former American Library Association president Nancy Kranich (2000), quotes Roosevelt as saying that "libraries are ... essential to the functioning of a democratic society... libraries are the great symbols of the freedom of the mind". Democracies need libraries as they are, as indicated by Schuman (1998, p. 50), "the building blocks of democracy, valued for their comprehensiveness, currency, openness and multiplicity of viewpoints [with] expert staff" who inculcate the philosophy that all knowledge is valuable to the seeker, that is, the public. An informed public constitutes the very foundation of a democracy; after all, in the view of Kranich (2000), democracies are about discourse. In the quest to fuel discourse, libraries make an essential commodity available to that discourse and that is, information and knowledge. In the process of making information and knowledge available, libraries guard against the tyranny of ignorance. Kranich (2000) adds the component of preservation when she states that if a free society is to survive, it must ensure preservation of its records and provide free and open access to information to all its citizens. It must ensure that the citizens have the resources to develop the information literacy skills necessary to participate in the democratic process.

Brown (2004, p. 174) indicates that Schuman, also a former American Library Association president, is very clear about the role of a public library to a democracy. Brown (2004, p. 174) quotes Schuman as saying that "librarians have a vital role to play, a social responsibility to work toward an invention of the future which is free and just for all". Schuman is critical of librarians being passive and elitist, and challenged them to embrace the view that librarians have the capacity to create societal changes and to perpetuate democracy. During her term as ALA president, she encouraged librarians to view themselves as agents of change working toward achieving a just, humane, and democratic society (Brown, 2004, p. 174).

As an essential pillar in democracy, libraries and librarians provide opportunities for citizens to develop the skills needed to gain access to information of all kinds and to put information to effective use in the generation of new knowledge for active participation in society, economic well-being and good health.

### **The public library and its role in equitable access to information**

Given that public libraries are significant contributors to education, they have over the decades earned the respect of their communities. What are the factors that give the library the right to stake the claim that they are the authentic providers of an information service? In an environment where there is a scarcity of material (which will be elaborated on later), the library is one of few institutions that have reasonable access to material within the context of

restricted availability. Libraries have the potential to access material from other libraries and from the rest of the world. Further, in an environment of limited finances, it is incumbent for libraries to be ingenious in attempting to bring as much information to their user community as possible. Libraries have access to expertise – personnel have the training to retrieve information and to package that information in a format that is easily adopted by the information seeker. Libraries also have the infrastructure to acquire, process and make available information.

It is clear from the literature (Fitch & Warner, 1998; Howley, 2004; Koneru, 2008; Stipanov, 2005) that public libraries have shaped and redefined their roles as community activities centers, community information centers, formal education support centers, independent learning centers, popular materials libraries, preschoolers' door to learning, reference libraries, and research centers. In broadening their role, public libraries assure equitable access to information and knowledge to the public.

Koneru (2008) states that the role of public libraries is one of “*information gateways* for uninterrupted and equitable access to information and knowledge resources *just-in-time*, fostering “Right to Information”; “Information for All (IFA)”; “Information for Development”, which are vital for achieving the Millennium Development Goals in an accelerated pace” (Koneru, 2008, p.2).

It is clear to the authors that Koneru (2008) has taken his cue from the UNESCO (1994) Public Libraries Manifesto which states that

“a public library is an organization established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organization to provide access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services on the basis of *equality of access for all*, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials are provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison.” (UNESCO, 1994, p.1).

This manifesto emphasizes the vital role of the public library in the various facets of human life, that is, education, personal and professional development, research, economic, social and cultural advancement (Forsyth, 2005; Koneru, 2008; Stipanov, 2005). For public libraries to fulfil this vital role, there must also be equitable access to information to the citizenry of the country. However, in the South African LIS environment there are major contradictions, a result of years of apartheid.

### **The library in contradictory environments**

A reality in the current South African climate is that there are large parts of the country that may be categorised as the “developing world” and there are other parts that may be categorised as the “developed world”. At the “developed world” end of the continuum, there is a surfeit of information and resources, and on the other end there is a dearth of information and resources: libraries have to play the role of mediator and provider of information, respectively. The challenge, in the minority sector of South Africa where there is a surfeit of information, is not access to information but rather on how to manage the provision of information which, according to Qvortrup (2007), serves the function of mediator. However, the challenge in the majority sector is for the librarian to roll up his/her sleeve, get his/her hands dirty in the quest to provide information in an accessible format. This would include librarians having to merge indigenous knowledge, expertise from developed countries, local conditions and such, and package that information in a format that will be meaningful to the local inhabitants in their quest for relevant information. This repackaging may also take the

form of verbal communication to ensure that the information is understood and that it can be converted into usable knowledge.

The question is “shall the twain ever meet?” Until there is a “cross subsidization” or “levelling out” of information and resources, libraries in the developing parts of the country must ensure that there is unhindered access to information that will benefit the individual, community and the country as a whole. By the same token, the “developed world” sector must make every attempt to open access and to share information and knowledge.

In the sector where there is a dearth of information, indigenous knowledge becomes a critical resource. However, indigenous knowledge, which has played such a critical role in the lives of the poor in the “developing world” of the country, is not recorded for posterity. Therefore, it becomes incumbent on the library as an institution that provides an information service to engage in activities that record indigenous knowledge for prosperity and shares that knowledge with the rest of South Africa and the world.

The contradiction within the South African LIS environment must be eradicated. The continued existence of this “contradiction scenario” is in violation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. There is commitment from the rest of the world to the Millennium Development Goals, which further highlights the violation of rights enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The Millennium Development Goals are about inclusion and working together at a global level to achieve a common vision, and libraries play a significant role by increasing access to information in support of the inclusion process.

Some of the developed countries, according Forsyth (2005), have made significant strides in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. However a large number of the developing countries are still plagued by extreme poverty, high death rates due to disease, high infant mortality rates and are hounded by the ravages of HIV/Aids. South Africa mirrors the global scenario in terms of the fact that it is home to developed and developing world conditions, a legacy of the apartheid system (Anderson, 2005; Rodrigues, Jacobs, & Cloete, 2006, p. 212-213). South Africa has the dilemma of trying to fathom which end of the stick to work with and the longer the deliberation continues, the more untenable the situation becomes.

### **The South African public library scenario and recreational reading**

For South Africa’s new democracy to thrive, there must be intervention from relevant stakeholders, particularly the government and its agencies. The LIS sector, as mentioned above, is a significant agent that can contribute to the promotion of democracy in South Africa. The authors are convinced that there is no debate as to the importance of the public library in the development of a democratic nation. This importance is clearly articulated by Du Preez (1998) who points out that,

“public libraries have a crucial role to play in the development of a healthy democratic society in which the quality of life of all individuals is enhanced to the highest possible level. To achieve this we will have to render appropriate and quality public library services, providing library material for meaningful lifelong learning, cultural development, literacy promotion and recreation” (Du Preez, 1998, p. 12).

Du Preez (1998) has placed recreational reading at the end of the list and this is interpreted as not being accidental. The “hierarchy” displayed by Du Preez is supported by Ali (2006, p. 153) who points out that recreational reading does little to empower the masses. He states that information is an economic resource, similar to capital and labour. As much as recreational reading is important, at this juncture in the development of South Africa and the continent, information is critical for growth and development.

Public libraries have to move away from the traditional Eurocentric format and provide a service that will address the needs of this country. Olden (2005) quotes Julius Nyerere, the President of Tanzania from 1961 to 1984, as stating that the development of a country is based on a sound educational system and that libraries play a pivotal role in this educational system. Nyerere was extremely perturbed with the shortcomings of public libraries in his country in reaching out to the poor and illiterate. He once remarked that "people have gone to the moon and we are still trying to reach the village and the village is getting further away" (Olden, 2005, p. 441-442). He commented on the lack of progress in taking public libraries to the villages and the fact that public libraries in Africa were still focusing on Eurocentric principles of meeting the recreational and leisure needs of the educated elite living in urban enclaves. Even today, despite the fact that South Africa is one of the most developed countries in Africa, it has not reached many of the rural areas in terms of public library services.

The authors are cognisant of the dilemma associated with the cliché "the chicken or the egg first" and the application of that cliché to recreational reading within the South African context. It has been argued that reading (including recreational reading) is significant for the eradication of illiteracy. Further, it is imperative that there is support for reading as the lack of reading (again, including recreational reading) will result in a relapse into illiteracy. However, given the dominance of such scourges as poverty, HIV/Aids, high infant mortality rates, high unemployment rates, information repackaged into formats that can be easily converted into knowledge should be the order of the day. This would include presenting the information in verbal format. Although the authors recognise the importance of recreational reading, one cannot escape the reality that there is a dire need for information and in an appropriate format that will satisfy the most basic human needs of a large sector of the South African citizenry.

It is unfortunate but a reality check for public libraries to break away from Eurocentric principles not just for the sake of wanting to be African but rather to address an absolute imperative and that is, to create a forum that will aid in the eradication of the prevailing scourges and in the process promote democracy and lifelong learning.

### **Public libraries and lifelong learning**

An extremely influential document, as mentioned earlier, impacting on public library development is the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto of 1994. The Manifesto purports that the public library is the local gateway to knowledge as it provides basic information for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.

Sturges and Neil (1998) recognize the importance of libraries for lifelong learning and suggest that there is a need to re-visit library models in Africa, and the authors include South Africa in this re-visit. Sturges and Neil (1998) take their cue from the fact that school libraries, in general, are totally inadequate as information provision tools. Therefore, public libraries in Africa in general are encouraged to fill this void. This implies a shift towards the public library playing a more active role in the formal education system rather than the traditionally indirect supportive role of the Western model, and to provide support for lifelong learning.

Before engaging in discussion on the role of public libraries as active participants in the educational system, it is important to very briefly tease out the issue of lifelong learning which is so dominant in the IFLA/UNESCO Manifesto and on the tongues of so many South African politicians. Roos (2001) states that "it is the declared intention of the South African

government to empower people from all walks of life by becoming life-long learners, thereby improving their skills and employment opportunities" (Roos, 2001 p.6). (However, the authors are of the opinion that the intention is yet to be translated into actions. For example, Hart (2007, p. 14) points out that in 2005 the South African government allocated one billion rands to public libraries. However, more than four years later that allocation is still bound perfectly in government red tape). Roos (2001) believes that unemployment in this country could be alleviated by turning more people into entrepreneurs running their own businesses and, who in time, would become employers. He points out that literacy is an essential element in the industrialization process. Therefore, if literacy is a minimum standard for industrialization, then, it must spread education. The ripple effect is that it makes public libraries an obligatory part of the educational process.

Sri Lankan author, Pradeepa Wijetunge (2000), believes that lifelong learning is learning achieved throughout life. It cannot be achieved without literacy because reading and writing is essential for learning, especially in developing countries where a considerable amount of information is still in printed format. The public library is an essential element in literacy and lifelong learning as it is the place which provides sanctuary for learning. In developing countries where individuals cannot afford to provide their own learning materials, the public library plays a significant role in propagating literacy and lifelong learning.

Shepherd (as cited in Wijetunge, 2000, p. 105) purports that lifelong learning is an increase in skills, knowledge, underlying values or the capacity to reflect. Effective learning will lead to change development and a desire to learn more. Lifelong learning is from pre-nursery to postretirement. Lifelong learning is said to be important because continuous learning is essential for survival in a changing world. According to the formula  $L > C$  where L is the rate of learning and C is the rate of change, individuals who are not learning individuals will be excluded, disadvantaged and will become disaffected. They will become a burden to a democracy and will retard the growth of the country.

The Sri Lankans have demonstrated concern about their country's 98 percent literacy rate (Wijetunge, 2000). South Africa, with one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, has a literacy rate of 68 percent (Aitchison & Harley, 2004). Aitchison and Harley (2004) point out that 12 million South Africans have incomplete general education and that 8.5 million are functionally illiterate. Sri Lankan libraries and the Sri Lankan government seem to have got things right. What is South Africa doing about the illiteracy issue? There is no evidence to demonstrate that there are constructive programmes for fast-tracking the eradication of illiteracy.

### **Public libraries and the South African educational system**

To return to the issue of the troubled relationship between the public library and the education system, libraries by their very nature are institutions of education and therefore, invariably, will have to cope with the educational policies of South Africa's new democracy. However, the reality is that government funding for public libraries has not increased proportionately with educational responsibilities. Another reality is that more than 70 percent of South African schools do not have functional libraries (Hart, 2004). The lack of proportionate increase in funding and the acceptance of the non-existence of school libraries place greater demands on public libraries to support learners and the leaders of tomorrow who are going to uphold South Africa's democracy.

Hart (2004, p. 111) argues that the lack of school libraries places a great strain on the resources of public libraries. In fact, some librarians claim victimization by recent educational

changes such as the 2001 Revised National Curriculum Statement<sup>1</sup> which states that one of its goals is to produce learners who can “collect, analyse, organise, evaluate and communicate information” (South African Department of Education, 2001, p.11). How can this be achieved if less than 30 percent of South African schools have adequate school libraries? Hence learners rely on public libraries for their information requirements. It must be noted that, due to poor living conditions, including lack of electricity and lack of space, the public library often becomes the only space for economically disadvantaged learners to do their schoolwork. Public libraries have to now play a much broader role of school, home, and provider of relevant information for research projects.

The strain on public libraries is exacerbated by the universal problem of lack of communication between schools and the public library. Schools do not inform the library of school projects in good time and learners are not familiar with how to effectively use the library. This perceived nonchalant attitude of educators does irritate librarians to no end. Educators do not recognize the stress they are placing on library resources, including the librarian. Public libraries are not receiving any additional assistance from the government to support this increased usage. Hart (2004) throws caution to the wind and states that libraries must embrace their role in the educational process to the extent that there is a shift from how the curriculum impacts libraries to how libraries impact the curriculum. An added benefit to the increased time that learners are spending in the library is the utilization by learners of their indigenous language materials. The domino effect would be an increase in demand for indigenous language materials impacting positively on all relevant parties. (This is based on the economic principle of supply and demand; however, this rationale is not applicable within the South African LIS context as will be demonstrated later). Learners will be reinforcing their reading and writing skills in their own native languages which will stimulate interest in indigenous language materials. An increase in interest will result in an increase in demand which presents libraries with the opportunity to purchase more indigenous languages materials. Again, there will be a domino effect which will influence the producers of the works, that is, publishers and authors.

### **Public libraries and adult literacy**

As previously mentioned, education and literacy are critical elements in a democracy. Given the poor information provision infrastructure in schools or the total lack thereof, the public library, by default, has become the single most important information provision institution in support of the new democracy.

What about the large contingent of illiterate adults? Can South Africa call itself a true democracy if there is such a large segment of the adult population that cannot read their ballot forms? Despite the high rate of illiteracy, only a minority of public libraries, 23 percent (at the national level), engage in literacy programmes (Hart, 2007, p. 21). The fact that only a small percentage is involved in adult education is at odds with the transformation agenda of the public library community of South Africa. For example, the theme of the 2005 LIASA<sup>2</sup> conference was "Taking libraries to the people" and the theme of 2006 SA National Library Week was "Libraries: partners in learning, nation building and development". Adult education

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<sup>1</sup> Reaffirms the government’s commitment to outcomes-based education (OBE). The Revised National Curriculum Statement streamlines and strengthens Curriculum 2005 and continues to be committed to OBE. It is a part of the process of transforming education and training to realise the aims of a democratic society and of the Constitution.

<sup>2</sup> LIASA (Library and Information Association of South Africa) is the professional body for library and information workers in South Africa.



is widely recognized as an important development activity contributing to the alleviation of poverty. It is accepted that adult education is outside the mission of the public library system of South Africa. However, public libraries are significant institutions in the development of society and South Africa's democracy, and therefore have a moral obligation to join the struggle against poverty and illiteracy through the engagement of adult education. This commitment must be reflected in policy and planning and more importantly, in resource allocation. Resource allocation is important as a large percentage of participants in adult literacy programmes lapse into illiteracy within just a few years if they do not have access to follow-up support and appropriate reading materials. It is argued that most adult illiterates are lapsed literates rather than people with absolutely no educational background.

Those libraries that contribute to the fight against illiteracy by participating in adult education, are to be commended for working in a field that has been experiencing setbacks, disappointments and slow progress in the decade-and half of democracy.

### **Provision of indigenous language materials**

The provision of appropriate reading materials for the new adult literates must be viewed against the backdrop of a progressive constitution which guarantees everyone the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural activities of his/her choice. However, this right is denied if individuals are not able to access adequate, current information in the language of his/her choice. To uphold this right, the government must accept responsibility for ensuring its citizens' rights to engage in an official language of their choice which, by implication, means a need for the growth in the pool of indigenous literature. Government's contribution to the increase in indigenous language material could be in the form of aid to authors, publishers and libraries with increased funding to stock such material.

However, in a study conducted by Fredericks and Mvunelo (2003), it was revealed that public libraries do not have documented policies for the collection development of indigenous language materials. This suggests that libraries do not regard it as a policy issue or service goal deserving serious attention. Libraries counter this by arguing that there is not enough interest in indigenous language material and few books are published in these languages. The study by Fredericks and Mvunelo (2003) also brings to the fore the fact that publishers do not publish because there is no interest and libraries cannot acquire books because publishers do not offer enough of them. It would seem that no one is willing to accept responsibility or take the initiative for the production of reading material in indigenous languages.

If resources in indigenous languages are important, why are more authors not taking charge and writing for their communities? The problem is threefold, namely: (1) there is inadequate public interest in books written in indigenous languages, (2) there is insufficient income from writing books to make it a full-time occupation, and (3) there is a reluctance by publishers to publish material in indigenous languages as it is not lucrative. As indicated earlier, there is a potential market with an increasing number of school learners using public libraries. This invasion by the school learners could have a positive spin-off as youth are often accompanied by their parents, who may be illiterate. If public libraries choose to engage in adult education, there would be a ready market for indigenous language material which could be exploited to the benefit of the possible new literates and a developing economy. The authors are of the opinion that there is a market for indigenous language material and if this market is nursed adequately by the relevant authorities, including the public library, it has the potential of significantly contributing to the eradication of illiteracy. The growth of this reading community could give birth to a new breed of authors writing in the indigenous languages. This extension of services by the public library to accommodate new literates through an

increase in the stock of indigenous language literature will enhance the public libraries' social responsibility and make it one of the critical institutions stimulating reconciliation and promoting democracy.

Public libraries have a significant role to play in the reconciliation process. If users go into the library and are confronted with only English and Afrikaans<sup>3</sup> language materials, some may feel that the library is not an accurate representation of the current cultural reality. The public library should be a place where no ethnic group feels disadvantaged. It should be a public place that promotes interaction among members of a diverse community and a place in which one can access information in the official language of one's choice. By adding more indigenous language materials to their collections, South African public libraries will be playing a key role in a number of development activities including the reconciliation process and the strengthening of a new democracy.

## **Conclusion**

The real concern in South Africa today is not the racial gap, but the gap between the “haves”, of any colour, and the “have-nots” – the existence of two economies “without a connecting staircase.” Public libraries, the essential agent for the dissemination of information, have the capacity to assist in developing that bridge that will significantly contribute to the reduction of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment.

History has demonstrated that many African countries started their democracy from a solid platform, but unfortunately the wheels came off somewhere between then and now. A typical example is that of Zimbabwe which was considered the beacon of hope for Africa during its early days of independence and democracy. Given this example, it becomes critical for public libraries to make its contribution to the promotion of democracy by making information as accessible as possible and in a format that can easily be converted into knowledge. The format would include, amongst others, verbal presentation to ensure that there is no “information overload”.

A significant concept for public libraries in South Africa at this present time is relevance. There is a need to move away from traditional public library functionalities and engage in functionalities and services that are relevant to the present climate within South Africa. It is beyond debate that public libraries play a critical role in the propagation of democracy. In the African continent and in South Africa specifically, the public library should be more than an institution propagating democracy – it has to be an institution of democracy itself providing information to all, in the format that is most relevant and in a language that is most preferred.

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<sup>3</sup> Afrikaans is one of the eleven official languages in South Africa. It was, in the days of apartheid, viewed as the language of the oppressor.

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