



**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR INNOVATIVE SERVICES – OUR STORY IN PROF.  
KENNETH DIKE STATE CENTRAL eLIBRARY, AWKA, ANAMBRA STATE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Public libraries need to practice community engagement in order to provide services that address societal issues and emerging needs in their different communities and not just those that are regarded as traditional library and information services. Prof. Kenneth Dike State Central eLibrary, Awka leveraged on the LRCN/IREX interventions in public libraries in Nigeria and exposure to public libraries activities on the continent to assess community needs and introduce innovative services such as job search corner, idea exchange and use of the library as a public community space to pull in partnerships that are working for the good of the community. These have caused an increase in patronage of the library and positively changed the perception the community has about the library.*

**Keywords** – Public libraries, Community engagement, Innovative services

**Introduction**

Libraries are meant to serve their user communities. Different types of libraries have specific clusters of users that they are meant to provide information services to. Public libraries, however, serve diverse groups with different needs and perspectives of what a library should provide. For more than three decades, the death knell seemed to have sounded for public libraries in developing countries, especially in Nigeria, where there appears to be an apparent disconnect between these libraries and the divergent clusters of people they are meant to serve. Literature is replete with many external reasons for this, including inadequate funding, dwindling government's interest and lack of reading culture in the country (Folorunso, 2010; Ebiwolate, 2010; & Opara, 2008). Meanwhile, examples abound of how public library services in developed countries have continued to transform spectacularly to include mobile services through the SMS portal and Internet, e-books, social media and chat reference, among others. These libraries are also becoming public access points for e-governance purposes, computer- based training centres and the place for the different clusters of users that make up the communities to connect and interact irrespective of their demographics, which vary as well as their information needs and expectations of how the public library should serve them (Pundsack, 2015).

It then becomes pertinent to investigate how Nigerian public libraries could key into these developments. How can they look inwards and provide relevant services in this era of ever- evolving and expanding individual and community information needs? How do they become community information centres and platforms that would provide access, opportunities and participation in today's knowledge based digital and networked society that would rightfully serve every member of the community? The public library is not an independent, esoteric and isolated resource in the community, it belongs to the community. Making the different groups that are in the community to understand that and have a sense of



ownership builds social inclusion, enables the formation of positive relationships, strengthening of ties, and most importantly, the development of library and information services that are patterned to support identified needs and goals of the community. According to Garmer (2014), the public library that engages its community by prioritizing and aligning its physical and digital space, resources, staff and programmes to support the community will have opportunities for success, sustenance and recognition as an institution that is relevant, desired, promotes learning, drives development and creates opportunities for better living.

Community engagement (CE) is the process whereby organisations adapt to the needs of their operating locality by extending their reach to the community, involving and collaborating with them in order to achieve more impact as well as greater long-term growth (Getzschman, 2015). It has always been understood that public libraries are meant to contribute to the educational, economic and social development of their local communities through the services they provide. However, CE implies a heightened focus on providing library and information services tailored to emerging needs and societal issues and not just those deemed fit or traditional, encouraging multi-layered partnerships that work for the community through interactions, exploring new ways of doing old things and creating connections that endear the library as an institution to the community. Importantly, this leads to the introduction of new services that are considered innovative because they are useful and add value to the lives of members of the community. This invariably would create a shift in perception and relationship whereby members of the communities are not regarded as passive beneficiaries of library services but actually become active stakeholders in the public library (Pateman & Vincent, 2010).

### **Review of Related Literature**

Many shades of CE exist. They include a range of activities that a public service body undertakes in its locality to empower the citizenry to make inputs on how best they could be served (Rogers & Robinson, 2004), interactions between identified groups of people that involve processes that are linked to problem solving or decision making where community input is used to make better decisions (Department of Primary Industries, 2008) and a process of working with identified groups connected by geographic location or special interests and affiliations with the primary purpose of addressing issues that affect them (Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2005). The International Conference on Engaging Communities, (2005) regards community engagement as a two way practice whereby the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of communities are integrated into different aspects of governance including policy development, decision-making and service delivery and the citizens that make up the communities are involved in the processes of this integration.

CE has been identified as a major strategy for building trust in government agencies. It could be used to introduce new resources, services and partners to the community, overcome apathy and cynicism about government services, create better communication between government agencies and the people they serve as well as help those agencies to gain a better understanding and views of the local communities (Shore, 2007). CE is meant to enhance the dividends of democracy and uplift the standard of living of communities, however some agencies are wary of outside influence from the community on the way they perform their statutory functions (Somerville & Hanes, 2008). That notwithstanding, CSV Consulting (2006) outlines six necessary components for successful CE namely; flexible approach and the ability to adopt new working practices to address issues in the community, willingness to get outside the comfort zone and take risks, working in partnership with other groups and individuals, mutual trust and transparency in handling facilities, funds and assigned tasks, accepting the fact that there might be possibilities of failure thus perceiving each interaction as a learning experience, and always having as the foremost focus what works for the community and adapting working practices to reflect that.

Three CE models in librarianship explain how the practice has been conceptualized in the profession. The Community-Led Service Planning Model was the result of a four-year (2004-2008), four-city (Vancouver, Regina, Toronto and Halifax) project in Canada. During the project, community development librarians engaged with many community members from different communities, who were



regarded as not being in the mainstream of those that libraries serve for community assessments, needs identification, service planning and delivery (Working Together Project, 2008). The Community-Led Service Planning Model postulates that because the traditional library service planning invariably provides a library-based, expected library service/programme, whilst the community-led service planning espouses a community-driven, unexpected and flexible service/programme with inputs by the community but facilitated by the library, their social impacts can never be the same (Williment, 2009).

The Needs-based library service CE model has the needs of the community as its centrepiece with the crucial components of strategy, systems and culture. It shares some similarities with the community-led model in that it recognises that the library is a part of its community. However, it proposes a restructuring of the entire system of library services with the main purpose of meeting the needs of users (Pateman, 2004; & Pateman, 2005). The Library-Community Convergence Framework (LCCF) for CE was developed by Mehra & Srinivasan (2007) through qualitative research studies. The LCCF extends the role of libraries to participate more fully in the lives of their communities and went further to broaden the function of libraries to include being proactive catalysts of social change in favour of people deemed to be socially excluded in multicultural communities. It also has a basic assumption that various libraries serve communities that are dynamic, diverse, heterogeneous, and ever-changing. Four common threads run across these models, namely; the need for change from the traditional library services, recognition of the fact that the communities libraries serve are inhabited by different people with diverse needs and perceptions of library services, that libraries need to become proactive in service delivery and finally the necessity to connect with the community through collaborations and participatory processes.

For public libraries, CE is more than a survival strategy. It is a major policy thrust in this era that libraries need to firmly establish their relevance and key into being major facilitators in the achievement of global goals in their different communities. It is also a natural progression for them as institutions that have been part of these communities and should be trusted enough by all stakeholders to drive development in all spheres of human endeavour (Gutsche, 2012). Public libraries that practice CE and focus on the changing demographics, lifestyles and societal issues in their localities develop the ability to evolve from being passive repositories of information resources to proactive institutions that explore innovative ways for the provision of services aimed at achieving strategic goals of the community, solving problems and addressing particular situations in the community (Anthony, 2014).

The Urban Libraries Council (2011), delineates key roles of CE in which libraries can take the lead namely; civic education, identification of challenging community issues and creating platforms to discuss the different opinions on such and developing action strategies. Public libraries could also bring diverse people, including government officials and corporate bodies with different viewpoints together to build stronger and more tolerant communities as well as lead efforts to develop a broad and inclusive community vision. However, Sung and Hepworth (2013) synthesized literature and came up with five different practical approaches CE by public libraries namely; use of the public library as a community space, creation of partnerships, community involvement in library services, involvement of volunteers in providing library services and engaging in public dialogue and deliberation.

Public libraries are the most commonly shared spaces in many communities as increasingly they are being regarded as community hubs where people of different ages, cultures, and backgrounds interact in a neutral environment to exchange ideas and information. Use of the library as a community space fits in with the concept of Placemaking, which highlights the use of a community's assets to create or reinvent public places as the shared destinations/hubs that promote the well being of the people in that community in all facets of life (Project for Public Spaces, 2012). Clients use the library in different ways either individually or collectively for information seeking, recreation, teaching and learning, making connections through interactions and contemplations (Peterson, 2005). Public libraries as a form of CE could also provide services and offer programmes that give opportunities for dialogue and conversations that help the community in decisions that affect their well-being. These services/programmes include the use of the library as a civic space, public forum and as a civic information centre (Budd, 2007). There is



agreement in literature that using the library as a community space enhances CE (Bryson, Usherwood & Proctor, 2003; & Goulding, 2004). However it is regarded as a passive form of community engagement which lays the foundation for partnerships (Goulding, 2009; & Pateman & Vincent, 2010). Nevertheless, ERS (2008) notes that the usage of the library by a wide range of groups and organisations from different backgrounds for their meetings and activities is because of the neutrality of the institution and this gives it the potential to become the focus for community interactions.

Partnerships are deemed essential for public libraries as they engage their communities. Organisations that provide social services are usually fragmented and dispersed with each Body typically serving a limited population with specific interventions; partnerships however provide opportunities for shared visions, agenda, goals and combined resources (Jolin, Schmitz & Seldon, 2012). Eastell (2008) has noted that local partnerships help libraries to tackle social exclusion and reach the marginalised and target groups such as young people and build trusting relationships with them which has the potentials to unleash innovative services in public libraries. Partnerships may take many forms, including shared facilities and service delivery efforts with various community partners or local and/or government agencies.

Public libraries are meant to serve every member of the community as they are regarded as neutral and inclusive. However, experiences and literature show that these libraries serve some segments of the community better than others (literate), and some segments not at all (non-literate). Getting the community involved as a form of CE in the provision of library services will ensure that everybody is served as it is done with the underlying implication that the community is the expert in what they want and need rather than library staff, and this moves the emphasis from library staff to the community as the key initiators and drivers of service innovation and improvement. Goulding (2009) opines that work around books or information is an encouraging area of CE that is full of potentials. Public libraries in recognition of needs and challenges in their localities could through reading programmes and services centred on improvement of reading culture such as spelling bees, quizzes and reading competition positively engage with their communities. Most importantly, getting the community involved in the planning and provision of government services heightens the perception that the government of the day cares about the needs and concerns of the people they serve thereby enhancing its democratic legitimacy (Killmeir, 2010).

It has been argued that using volunteers for library services/programme is perceived as a form of CE as well as a way of deepening the practice, more so as it expands the belief that the public library belongs to the community, thus everyone should be given the opportunity to contribute his time and skills to library service/programmes. This is regarded as critical in communities where cultural and language differences exist and where there are groups that are regarded as not being part of the communities originally. The public library could use volunteers who have links with such groups. This will help the library to make connections, create platforms for mutual understanding and knowledge sharing. (Nicol & Johnson, 2008). However, Macdonald (2011) cautions that in using volunteers public libraries should consider the legal requirements and implications in relation to data protection, disclosure requirements, insurance and safety.

### **Our story ... Prof Kenneth Dike State Central e-library, Awka**

The Prof. Kenneth Dike State Central e-library is the headquarters of Anambra State Library Board. Through advocacy and divine grace the Board found favour in the heart of His Excellency Mr. Peter Obi who built the present headquarters of the library and named it Prof. Kenneth Dike State Central e-library Awka. It is situated at Aroma junction along Awka Onitsha expressway besides Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS), Awka and was commissioned on 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2014.

**Fig. 1 Prof. Kenneth Dike State Central eLibrary, Awka**



### **Our Leverages**

Two events in particular made the leadership of the library to change tracks and do things differently. The first was the inclusion of the Library in the IREX and LRCN intervention in public libraries in Nigeria. The intervention is meant to teach digital literacy skills to library users as well as life development and entrepreneurial skills that would equip them to participate fully in the digital age, give them an edge in competing for the job vacancies, and most importantly, furnish them with the knowledge and practicalities of engaging in e-commerce, which is a better alternative to white collar jobs, as it would help them be self-employed. Starting off with the intervention was tasking, as there was dearth of library users. The NGO that works with the library on the intervention did quite a lot of publicity – fliers, posters, banners and jingles on the radio. The leadership of the library got the controlling Ministry to buy into the project and there were TV appearances by the library leadership as well as Radio Talks.

A lack of enthusiasm by the citizenry about library matters was noticed. It made the leadership of the library to start thinking about how to make people ‘own’ the library as theirs. The second event was the sponsorship of the Head of the library to AfLIA conference in Ghana by EiFL facilitated again by LRCN. Many lessons were learnt; many examples of what other public libraries in the continent are doing were noted. These events led the library to realise that there are outstanding issues to be dealt with namely; the need for meaningful and sustained interactions with the community the library is meant to serve, meeting the community on their own turf and feedback from the community that would provide firm markers on what they want the library to be doing for them.

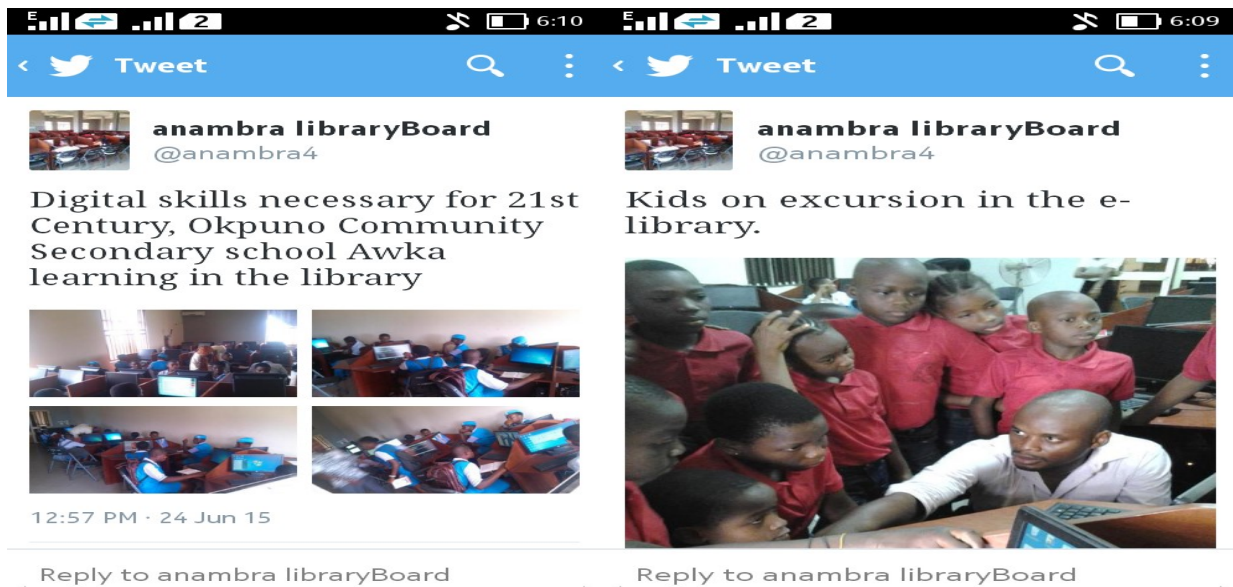
### **Innovative Services**

In tackling these, new services were created. A flexible approach was used as the library did not depend on any known model, rather it adapted to the needs of the community. First, a new Section – Community engagement and empowerment Section was created. Two librarians and a library assistant were posted there to work directly under the Chief Librarian in charge of Public Services Department and the Head of the library. Their first task was to reach out to primary and secondary schools in the community to find out how best the library could serve the pupils and students. Surprise! The schools did not know the Library was there. They also did not know they had access to the library! The library organized excursions, story hours and children’s programmes for schools in the library. These activities let the teachers and the children know that the library exists and that it is there to offer services to them. This taught us a lesson – never to assume that everyone in the community knows that the library is in its present location and that all are welcome. The library is sustaining this service as other schools have been invited to visit this new school session.

**Fig 2. Screenshots culled from Twitter of pupils and students on excursion to the Library**

The image displays four tweets from the account 'anambra libraryBoard' (@anambra4) on a mobile phone interface. Each tweet includes a profile picture, the account name, a text description of a library activity, a date, and a grid of photos showing the activity.

- Tweet 1 (Top Left):** Posted on 13 Jul 15 at 3:10 PM. Text: "It was a warm welcome for kids from De Lily Nursery & Primary School as they visited the library today. Great kids!". Photos show children in school uniforms.
- Tweet 2 (Top Right):** Posted on 25 Jun 15 at 1:19 PM. Text: "Storytelling time in the library today with children of Decimal Foundation School Amawbia.". Photos show children sitting on the floor in a library, listening to a story.
- Tweet 3 (Bottom Left):** Posted on 21 Jul 15 at 1:12 PM. Text: "Orient Secondary School Ogbunike in the Library today.". Photos show a group of people in a library setting.
- Tweet 4 (Bottom Right):** Posted on 23 Jun 15 at 1:27 PM. Text: "Girls 4 technology! JS3 girls from Stella Maris Sec sch Abagana taking digital literacy classes in the library today.". Photos show girls sitting at desks with laptops, participating in a digital literacy class.



Source: <https://twitter.com/@anambra4>

Assessments of the library's readership found out that many unemployed youths come to the library to read and just hang out. A Job Search Corner was created where job vacancies from newspapers, magazines and online sources are pasted and changed weekly. Also CVs were solicited from users who are unemployed, we built up a data bank and their qualifications are matched with the vacancies as we know about them. The Community engagement and community Section has been given a mobile telephone and they send SMS alerts and emails to these users whenever there is a definite match. The outcomes of this service are yet to be determined as many of the applications sent for jobs are still pending but it encourages the job seekers as well as parents that the Library is involved and interested in the economic well-being of the community.

It was noted that the youths form the bulk of those most likely to use the facilities and resources of the library. Where would one be able to meet a large number of youths? The IREX/ LRCN training had taught that libraries ought to get their stories out so that they could attract more patronage and advocate successfully. The library opened a Twitter page with the handle @anambra4. The page has been used to draw young people to the library. The library started a 'selfie service'. Young people were encouraged to take pictures of themselves in any Section of the library with their mobile phones, follow the library on Twitter and send the pictures to @anambra4 for free internet hours. It created a buzz among the young people and many pictures were uploaded to the library's page. The service is ongoing. The library has also opened a Facebook page and a Google+ account. Being on the social media gives the library opportunities to interact informally with the community, answer their questions online, deal with complaints and learn from what libraries in other climes are doing.

**Fig 3 Twitter account of the Library**



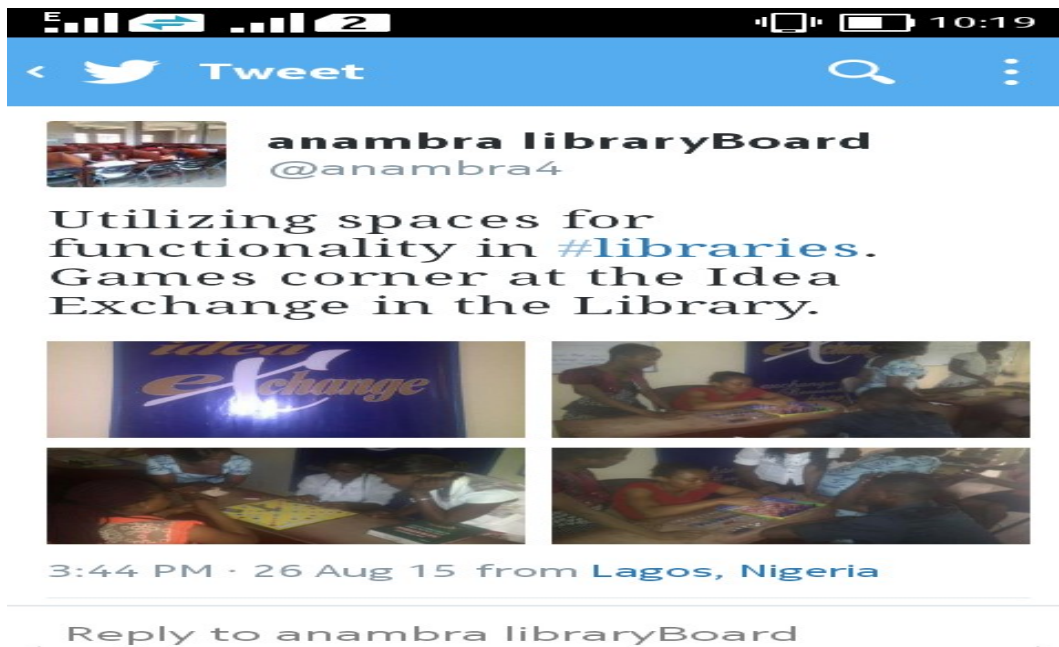
Source: <https://twitter.com/@anambra4>

It was on Twitter that the library saw a service that another library in Europe was offering; it was adapted and we started ‘100 authors that make you proud to be a Nigerian’. We keep slips of paper in the Reception and invite users to list the authors that make them proud to be Nigerians and drop into a carton. Three hundred and fifty (354) responses have been received so far. The analysis of the responses has motivated the Library to acquire the books of those authors named especially those not in the library. This has increased the usage of the library’s Nigerian Section as readers get what they request for as much as is within the Board’s financial means. The service is ongoing as the library views it as a way of communicating with the community and providing what they ask for. To keep the communication lines open for sustained engagement with the community, the library set up ‘Idea Exchange’. This consists of white boards and markers where library users can write their thoughts about just anything. Some of them use it to make complaints about resources and services in the library, staff and other readers or make comments on social and political issues.

However, some use it as an information commons and knowledge sharing point where they ask intellectual questions on their researches in their subject areas. Answers, ideas, suggestions and counter-suggestions are also written down by others and it goes on and on. The library feels strongly that it helps intellectual, political and social discourse go on amongst the readers. Writings on the Board are left for as long as it takes to round up a discussion or when there is no space left anymore! The library also utilised the same space to set up a games corner. This was done because interactions with young readers made the library to recognise the fact that they do get bored reading for long periods and that they would appreciate whatever the library could provide that would give them a few moments to relax before going back to study. The board games of Scrabble and Chess are kept at the Idea Exchange with chairs and tables. The games strategically placed where they could also vent in writing gives them a sense of belonging as they identify the library as not just a reading space but also a place where they are free to join their voices to discourses, make inputs, interact and relax.

**Fig 4 Idea Exchange and Games corner**





Source: <https://twitter.com/@anambra4>

Partnerships are giving the library wings to soar. The Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency, Anambra State Command hosts an annual quiz competition in Anambra State. The library reached out to them and gave them the auditorium. In return, the library got 200 Dogonyaro tree seedlings, 58 information resources, 7 posters and they helped the library to start a Drug Free club. The club is coordinated by library Staff but operated by volunteers who are our users and they help to give out the information of the dangers of drug abuse to schools, organisations and market groups. The library has a relationship with the National Youth Service Corps, Anambra State. Corpers are encouraged to use the library space to do their community development service only when their programmes fit into the vision of the library such as inculcation of literacy, skill acquisition and career talks. Such programmes give the library visibility and more patronage. Medical personnel of the Anambra State Teaching Hospital noticed that the library's wifi is accessible in their hospital. They were given internet access at particular hours. In return, they have started giving free medical screening, advice and minor treatments in the library.

**Fig. 5 – Medical services for Library users and partnerships with NYSC**





Source: <https://twitter.com/@anambra4>

### Outcomes

These services spawned by community engagement has increased the visibility of the library and boosted readership. Also, the perception of what the library is, what happens in the library and the usefulness of the institution in the community is changing from being an esoteric repository of information resources to a community centre where one can read, interact, relax, acquire skills and make the society better by volunteering and joining in discourses that affect the community. Most importantly, librarians are being challenged to broaden their understanding of what library services entails, to increase their skills set – professional and interpersonal and then to learn and keep on learning so as to be able to cope with increased patronage and queries.

### Conclusion

Public libraries need to make themselves part of the community and not stand-alone institutions that are hardly used. Looking inwards to understand their communities and their needs as well as working with whatever tools they have will help in achieving higher usage of their resources and facilities and change the perception of their user communities. This inevitably, would help in quantifying and justifying their continued existence, the need for additional funding and furthermore rekindle government's interest in public libraries.



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