

USER FEE IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: PERSPECTIVES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN TANZANIA'S LIBRARIES

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Abstract

The user fee practiced in public libraries in Tanzania since 1996 and implications of the fee are examined in relation to the role of libraries in economic development. The paper aims at stimulating discussions among professionals and other stakeholders regarding the effects and controversies of the issue. Based on a survey of literature, brief and informal discussions with eight library users and librarians in three public libraries in Tanzania, it looks into the fee concept and discusses the experiences and implications of the fee to both the public and public libraries that so far are not optimally used. In addition, charged services in four public university libraries have been examined for possible lessons to be learnt. While recognizing the growing pressure to commercialize access to information resources as a strategy for coping with economic difficulties in the public sectors, the paper cautions that the practice may have more disadvantages than advantages. It is observed that while there may be other reasons preventing the public from using libraries, the fee may actually be a hindrance to developing positive attitudes towards use of libraries by the public for their socio-economic development. The authors see the existence of an opportunity for librarians to make tangible contribution in the society's development process by promoting the use of easily accessible information through public libraries rather than supporting restrictive rules. It is concluded that paying for basic library services may not necessarily be a solution to the library's economic constraints across the board. For this reason, Tanzania's libraries should consider the present period as a period for promotion, advocacy, and investment in the value and role of information for economic growth and in the expansion as well as creation of public library clientele. Among the recommendations put forward is the need for conducting in-depth studies that would profile the actual users of these libraries, determine membership trend and find out user opinion and attitude towards fee practices in Tanzania. The paper also recommends the use of participatory methods in order to make fair decision regarding access, use and sustainability of public libraries. The paper finally suggests some possible alternatives for economic sustainability of the libraries.

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Introduction

User fee in public libraries is one of the debatable subjects among library and information professionals worldwide. The debate is mainly because there are two schools of thought on this issue. One which asserts the importance of user fees as a solution for promoting value and sustainability of the libraries, and the other which stands for the fundamental principle of free access to information as a key factor to knowledge acquisition and economic development.

This paper is an attempt to stimulate discussions and bring up controversial issues in the public library system in Tanzania and in other countries. Issues that may need re-consideration in an effort to make the role of public libraries in economic development more apparent. One such issues is the regulation that requires a person to pay an indiscriminatory user fee prior to entering and using basic library services such as accessing information, especially printed information resources such as reference books or newspapers.

The paper is based on a reasonably extensive literature review, brief informal discussions with library users and follow-up communications with a few librarians in three public libraries in Tanzania that were done at different times in 2002 and January 2005. Libraries that were visited to obtain user and librarians' opinion were those of the Tanzania Library Services (TLS) including the Central public library in Dar es Salaam, Morogoro Regional Library and Kilosa District Library in Morogoro region. In addition charged services in four public university libraries have been highlighted to broaden the scope of the subject and draw possible lessons from university libraries.

Perspectives of the library fee discussions

User fee is frequently used interchangeably with user charges. It may include but not limited to, registration/membership fee, fines, and charges for value added services such as rush (express) document delivery, book borrowing and so on. The debate is not on these but on the fee required for a person to access and use the basic services in a public library, where a public library refers to "an organization established, supported and funded by the

community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organization" (IFLA₁, 2000). Once a fee is charged there can no longer be a guarantee that no potential user may be denied of access to resources in a public library because he/she cannot afford. Since such a fee does not include fees for the legal requirements of observing copyright issues, or fees in form of overdue fines that are charged to essentially re-enforce the equal access principle, the value-added service charges that most of the users are normally happy to pay, the problem may arise in drawing a line between what should be charged and what should be offered for free.

In this debate it is acknowledged that traditionally basic public library services have been offered for "free" or without direct charge to the user. Scholars such as Kentish (1995), appear to suggest that in some cases it is more the librarians rather than users who strongly support the "free" concept. Such views are probably not surprising because librarians as professionals are, in most cases, more aware and concerned (or supposed to be concerned) with making information accessible with as minimal restrictions as possible, than any other group of people.

It is acknowledged that public libraries are, in principle, not for business and in most countries they serve society purposes. In democratic societies for instance, information is viewed as a public good available to all. This is why there should ideally, be a system in place for each community to facilitate and sustain a central information resource centre. We find library associations in developed countries strongly opposed to the idea of charging user fees for the provision of information by libraries and Information service centres that receive their major support from public funds (ALA, 1993).

Among the arguments presented in favour of a fee for library services is that libraries are not alone in the information market (Moore and Schauder, 1991) and therefore should compete to survive or else perish. Other arguments consider libraries just like any other component within the economy and so, as is the case with several other sectors, should strive to remain in business by sustaining their services. It is also observed that charging for library services may be, to a large

extent, a struggle for survival as a response to the economic pressure facing public institutions world wide. For libraries specifically, budgetary reductions have come at a time when information production is proliferating and prices for information resources and products both in print and electronic formats are escalating. The paper by Moore, and Schauder cited above is one of the useful analytical papers on the fee concept. Other useful papers on the fee versus free debate include those by CAUT (2000); Edoka, (1991); McEldowney (1984) and King (1980).

Different libraries, however, take different views on how much free service for freedom of information may be supported. Therefore there are no standard fees or standard services as such that are supposed to be charged. Libraries are endowed differently in terms of financial capabilities. Further more, each library has its own priorities, to some, cost recovery and revenue generation comes high on the priority list while others the policy is to push for alternative sources of funds and stand to the philosophical principle of the profession in an effort to make a contribution towards economic development.

Brief general history of public library services in East Africa

Rapid development of library services in Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon. It can only be traced back to the early 1960s and 1970s. For instance, by 1962 the only well developed public library service were those in Eastern Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone (Kaungamno, 1979). There is no record of a library having existed in pre-colonial times in East Africa except that one in Kilwa on the East African Coast (IFLA, 1999).

Apart from University libraries, the first public library system for East Africa was introduced to Tanzania (by then Tanganyika) in 1963 a few years after independence. The Library systems for Uganda and Kenya were formed in 1964 and 1965 respectively. Their formation resulted from the separation of the former East African Literature Bureau following the Hockey report of 1960 (Broome, 1965, IFLA, 1999,). The Tanganyika Library Services (TLS) Board which was established by the Act of parliament of 1963, and

amended to become the Tanzania Library Services Board in 1975 (URT, 1975), was mandated with responsibilities for all library developments in the country. By 1972, Tanzania was one of the most progressive countries in library development in East Africa. The TLS developed rapidly at the beginning and by 1979 it had a functioning library system including plans to launch rural libraries. It had branch libraries in twelve townships and many trained librarians (Abdullahi, 1979). Funding of the libraries in Tanzania was by the central government through the Ministry of Education, TLS and by Local Authorities. However the centralized library management system had financial and administrative problems that resulted into the inability to deliver information services as expected. The services have now been brought under the local administration in order to make to the local authorities and the general public more responsible. Currently all regions except three in Tanzania mainland have public libraries in their respective regional towns.

The Act establishing TLSB is not categorical on the user fee issue, but it gives the Board the power, with the consent of the Minister (of education), to make by-laws including those concerning financial resources (URT, 1975, op. cit.). However, basic public library services in Tanzania had been without direct charges to the user until 1996 when TLSB passed a resolution to have a small service fee on a cost-sharing basis¹

The problem

A fee for using the public libraries in the Tanzanian context appears to be an issue that warrants a discussion by information professionals as well as library patrons, potential patrons and other stakeholders. No matter how small the fee is there are a number of fundamental problems. One basic problem is that the user fee is a limitation to some users to access the information they may require for knowledge or leisure purposes. In addition, given the poor economic base of the majority, a fee becomes a hindrance and de- motivation to developing and nurturing the reading habits that are desired among the general population for educational and economic development.

While commercialization of access to information is a growing phenomenon, and while there is a general agreement among library and information professionals on the need for resource mobilization in libraries in Africa (Kiondo, 2002), there is no consensus on issues such as which libraries should be charging, what is acceptable and what is not acceptable as resource mobilization strategy and so on. The “pay for the service” strategy may not have adverse consequences in academic and research libraries’ environment where most users not only recognize the value of information, but are also motivated, capable and prepared to pay for it. The problem is with users and most the potential users of the public libraries, particularly in smaller and more rural townships, who first may not have enough resources to spend in this way, but secondly, may not even be appreciating the role of the library services in knowledge acquisition and economic growth.

Some experiences in Tanzanian public libraries

There is little published and up to date literature regarding public libraries in Tanzania in general and the user fee issue in particular. However, from grey literature and correspondences with librarians, it is established that there are basically two types of fees; first there is the membership fee, which has been in place since the establishment of TLS, and is paid on yearly basis. The fee is currently TAS 3,000.00, 2,000.00 and 1,000.00² for adults, students and minor members respectively³. Upon paying this fee, one becomes a member for that particular year and is allowed to use all public libraries in the country without having to pay extra fees except for photocopying and Internet service where available. The second fee is the visitor’s fee for non-members or those who have not renewed their membership (expired membership). This fee is TAS 500.00 and is charged on a daily basis irrespective of age or status of the user. With the fee regulation in place, a person is not allowed to enter and use any of the library services unless s/he first pays this fee.

All eight library users randomly approached for opinion at both Morogoro and Dar es Salaam public libraries, were willing to pay the yearly membership fee, arguing that it was cheaper and affordable than the daily payment. All these users happened to be students; six of them were from secondary schools and two were Open University students. All except one did not intend to renew membership after completion of studies. On users' opinion regarding library fee if the services were to be taken to rural areas, one user with an experience in rural life argued that farmers may not be willing to pay because they would not afford and may not find it useful to spend their money that way.

A librarian at a district library reported a drop in the number of people visiting the library after the introduction of the fee⁴. The drop was however not supported with statistics. The decrease in library use following the introduction of user fees has been observed elsewhere (McIntyre and Lackey (1993). Although it was observed that the Central Public Library in Dar es Salaam was heavily used at the time of the authors' visit, the majority of these users were students who in most cases are obliged to use the library for school assignments and probably as "study rooms". To confirm this authors observed a number of students going through their lecture notice and personal textbooks rather than using library materials available in the library.

One of the useful indicators of demand for library services and willingness to pay a fee would be user statistics. However, statistics may not be reliable and useful all the time particularly in the absence of a statistical trend or an in-depth study. Statistics for Morogoro Regional Library for instance indicated the average number of registered members for 2001/2002 to be 440 and 550 for students (both junior and secondary school children) and adult members respectively⁵. Statistics for the month of September 2004 however, shows a sharp increase of up to 4667 and 1954 for students and adult members respectively⁶. Reasons for the sharp increase could not be immediately established. This

increase notwithstanding, considering the urban students population (from more than six secondary schools, 15 pre-schools and 36 primary schools existing in Morogoro urban district) (URT, 1997), it appears that only a minority of students are members of the public libraries. The concern here is mainly because while the number of schools in Morogoro region has increased more than 130% since independence the number of students using the public libraries is still very low. It is known that public primary and secondary schools throughout the country have libraries that are either poorly equipped and stocked or non-existent in a functional and usable state. Students would therefore be expected to use public libraries as an alternative to school libraries.

An overview of user charged services in public university libraries and one public library in Tanzania

Type of service	UDSM	SNAL	OUT	MU	MG Public
Basic Access/Visitors fee	v	x	x	x	v
Membership/External fee	v	v	x	x	v
Overdue fines	v	v	NA	v	v
Photocopying	v	v	v	v	-
Inter Library Loan	x	x	-	-	-
Document Delivery	x	x	-	-	-
Printing from a computer terminal	v	v	-	-	-
Internet access	x	x	-	-	v
CD-ROM Search		x	-	-	-

Key:

V - There is a user fee to the service

X - Service available free of charge

- - No fee & service not available
Tanzania

NA - Information not available

MG Public - Morogoro region Public Library

UDSM - University of Dar es Salaam Library

SNAL -Sokoine National Agricultural Library (at SUA)

OUT -Open University of

MU -Mzumbe University

The public library system in Tanzania, like in several other developing countries, appears to have responded to the economically harsh environment by, among other strategies, imposing a fee for using the basic services in an effort to mobilize funds to offset some of the library expenditure. According to Morogoro Regional Librarian, fee collected is used to purchase some stationery which lasts for up to three months. However, it is probably a dilemma for librarians who must re-enforce the "pay first" regulation at the same time may be wishing to observe professional ideals.

Though this paper's focus is on public libraries, public university/academic libraries make an important group in the library fee versus free services debate. Thus fee practices in these libraries are highlighted for broadening the scope of the discussion and possibly drawing some lessons from their experiences. The public and university libraries are similar in the values they adhere to such as a subscription to the principle of equity of access to information. In addition, both are basically funded or supported by local, regional or national governments.

Services that are being charged in public university libraries are shown in the table above. Libraries such as Sokoine National Agricultural Library (SNAL) are obliged to serve other groups of users that are different from the academic community such as farmers and agricultural extension staff. Decisions regarding fee modalities therefore have to take into consideration situations of all other mandatory user groups. In university situations, there are individuals and groups of users that are prepared to pay for specific information services that match their information needs, or for extra ordinary requirements, provided they are assured of quality services; timely and efficiently. The challenge then remains with librarians to see to it that users get value for their money. Individuals and groups being referred to here include non-primary users such as entrepreneurs, business people, consultants, legal professionals and so on who actually make profit out of using these libraries. Fees to this kind of users are being implemented at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) library, and have been implemented successfully in other parts of the world (Ward and Dugan, 1999).

Access to UDSM library is however restricted by a fee for basic/visitor access. This fee, though it raises further debate, is probably inevitable, given the limited capacity of this library in relation to the rising student population. ICT based services specifically Internet access and document delivery are now offered freely to users at both UDSM and SNAL, unlike when the services were first introduced in these libraries. Imposing a fee to these services was found inappropriate. It was then argued first, the services were just like any other reference services except for the technology used to deliver them and secondly that the services had no much added cost direct to the library itself.

Opportunities and challenges for economic development

It is well known that issues surrounding poverty preoccupies governments in developing countries. In turn, poverty makes the whole issue of library fee in developing countries probably more complex than it is in developed countries. In the former, librarians ought to view their work as an opportunity to contribute towards poverty alleviation strategies in their respective societies. Such a contribution could be by way of encouraging use of relevant information available in libraries as one of the strategies to fight ignorance and promote knowledge acquisition.

To a great extent the public library services and resources in Tanzania are not optimally used. It is the authors' opinion therefore that a fee might worsen the situation of non-recognition of the role of public libraries. Although library budgetary reductions create pressure on libraries to generate income, other scholars argue that such incomes are at most merely "for their survival" (Bawa et al, 1998) rather than for achieving library's basic goals as contributors in knowledge acquisition, intellectual growth and societal advancement.

Among important issues that need to be examined is the amount of money that can be generated through users' direct fees in a public library system and for what use? Experiences in other countries as confirmed by a study conducted in Nigeria shows that the fee collected is actually negligible and not enough for cost recovery (Edoka, 1991 op. cit.). Although revenue collected in some public libraries in Tanzania such as in Morogoro urban district library, for example was

reported to be useful for stationery costs⁷, one may wish to examine at what cost was the usefulness of these fees, and whether the stationery could not be met by the government subventions in any way. The Association of African Universities (AAU) (2002), cautioning about fee issue argues that with the introduction of fees government funding would decline even further as government will see library activities continuing (quality notwithstanding) despite budget reduction.

Another, equally important, consideration is on whether fees encourage use of the libraries or could actually be a reason for the common public to ignore or remain indifferent in the use of these libraries. According to a study in Harare for instance, introduction of fee was found to discourage users of libraries especially children users (Abelsnes, 1998). The situation in Tanzania might not be much different from the findings in the study above. Given the fact that on average the basic needs poverty incidence in urban areas of Tanzania other than Dar es Salaam city (i.e. areas with established public libraries) was 41 percent in 1991/92 (URT, 2000), and that more than 50 percent of the population had incomes below the poverty line in 1995 (URT, 1998) it is not surprising that such a population may find it irrational to visit a library that requires prior payment.

In some situations however, lowered number of library users due to fee requirements is sometimes viewed positively mainly because restrictions deters those who would otherwise visit public libraries only for leisure or to “socialize” or just to “pass time” or find temporary shelter⁸. But unless a person is well motivated, such restrictions may end up being a hindrance to those wishing to read for personal growth or for recreation and leisure. One may wish to put up an argument based on IFLA’s guidelines that recreation and leisure reasons are part and parcel in the primary purposes of the public library (IFLA₂, 2000). In addition, a mere habit of visiting a library for the purpose of reading newspapers should be encouraged as a positive step in developing the

reading habits and widening knowledge. In the absence of a study on the library user profile and use habits, reasons why people visit or were actually visiting the libraries prior to introduction of the fee may not be known.

In developed countries a number of studies seeking user opinion and reactions regarding fees in libraries either indicate user's reluctance to fee or a significant drop in library service use on introduction of a fee (Kinnucan et al, 1998; Murphy and Lin, 1996; Farmer, 1995 and Converse and Standera, 1975). While other findings have reported increase in library membership on removal of membership fee (Oder, 2001).

With economic difficulties worldwide, it has been a growing practice to have fees in other community services such as health care, garbage collection in towns and so on. This fee, no matter how small it may be viewed, leaves those who cannot afford it unattended. In Tanzania it has been reported for health care services for instance, that some opt to go for traditional methods/medicines when they cannot afford the "small" medical fee (the Guardian, 2002). It is in recognition of the negative effects of health cost sharing fee, that the regulation makes exceptions for people who cannot afford. One may wish to contemplate on what happens for people who cannot afford the "small" fee for library and information services. Tanzanian government has made primary education compulsory and banned school fees in public primary schools so that all could attain basic education. Likewise fees for public secondary schools have been reduced. It would be expected therefore that compulsory education should go hand in hand with policies encouraging use of basic library services as an effort to promote literacy, encourage reading, and stimulate economic development. This is a challenge to library and information professionals.

In developed countries of the US, Australia and Europe, it appears convincing that there is a clear link between unlimited access to knowledge and information and societal economic advancement. It can safely be said that for these countries having an informed society has long been recognized as an important factor for development. The importance of having an informed society is honored through

library association's stance of promoting free access to information and knowledge (ALA, 1993; Abelsnes, 1998 op. cit.). In some of these countries, libraries have actually been prohibited from charging user fees in support of easy access to information for all (Rogers and Oder, 1999). In this respect, developing countries might benefit from the experiences of their counterparts whose policies advocating easy access to information have had positive impact to economic development even in rural areas (Mazie, 1995).

Emphasis for free availability of information is more important today in the light of the change into information-based economy and globalization. This point is underscored by what is currently being observed where relatively freely available information through Internet is increasing with increasing pace of globalization. Some international bodies such as Oxfam advocate for a more free access principle, by advancing a theory that "knowledge is now the critical component to production, and access to it represents a key divide between rich and poor" (Oxfam, 2000). Here libraries may find a unique role to play as they hold large amounts of information that can be made available to a large proportion of the society.

The decision for a fee in public libraries in Tanzania does not seem to have taken into consideration the country's socio-economic developmental level as well as the socio-economic differences between communities and between individuals. A campaign proposed by Oxfam sums up the implications of restrictions of information to the poor by stating that:

"for poor women and men, often the only information they will be able to use is that of public or available under universal access rights (or potentially that obtained by illegal copying and use) the pricing for proprietary information invariably places it out of the reach of the poorest" (Oxfam, 2000).

In situations where the country is fighting issues of compounding poverty, poor agricultural productivity, diseases like HIV/AIDS in particular, ignorance, and the rising levels of drug abuse, one would expect increased efforts in making information resources readily accessible to the community

through libraries specifically the public libraries that are in principle public properties. Libraries would then be left with only one big challenge; that of sustaining the highly valued services.

Conclusion and recommendations

While having a fee for access to information seems to be a growing phenomenon in libraries today, it has to be conceded that the practice, particularly for libraries in developing countries though it may have some benefits; it has a number of adverse effects. Some of these effects include indirect restrictions to the use of the libraries. It may also negatively influence attitudes of the general public towards public libraries and may discourage potential library users.

User fee in public libraries in Tanzania like in many other countries is to a large extent a response to the economic pressure facing public institutions today. Various strategies to overcome financial difficulties are being proposed and tried in the country. However, instituting a fee for basic public library services including a right to enter a library may not necessarily be a solution to libraries' economic constraints across the board. For economically disadvantaged groups, introduction of user fee may actually be uneconomical in the long run and pose as a hindrance to societal development. Librarians in Tanzania and other similar countries may wish to seize an opportunity to make a contribution in the development process by advising and influencing policy decisions regarding the making of access to information a right to all.

Discouraging a fee for basic library services for the time being may have a positive impact on the long-term social and economic development. For libraries in economically less developed countries, this time should be considered as the time for investing in the value of information and expansion as well as creation of public library clientele as well as library services demand. It should be a period of advocacy rather than restrictions and barriers to the service. However, economic difficulties facing the libraries cannot be ignored. In view of this fact, other alternative ways for public library sustainability in Tanzania are being proposed to include:

- Aggression on the part of library managements in following up any type of funds that may be, in principle, earmarked for their libraries by respective government authorities from government revenues or development partners. This should go hand in hand with advocating for mainstreaming library activities into the regular government budgets and for reasonable fund allocations.
- Patrons who may be requesting for extra ordinary services from a public library such as “can not wait” document delivery, “hard to locate materials” or “find it by any means” should be paying a competitive fee.
- Commitment of professional bodies for library and information workers in order to have a common voice from where to do the lobbying and advocacy to make the role of libraries clearly understood by decision makers and the general public.
- A study to find out, among other things, public library user profile particularly for district libraries in rural areas, analyze library use and user attitude and opinion regarding the fee regulation in relation to prevailing socio-economic situation.
- Participatory decision making process should be employed as appropriate when a need for a change or new regulation arises. This process will help in creating awareness and acceptance of new regulations.

Footnotes

- 1 Personal communication with TLS headquarters staff in Dar es Salaam on 06/08/2002, quoting TLS board minutes of 1996.
- 2 One USD is about 1,000 TAS.
- 3 Minor members refers to children up to primary school level
- 4 Personal communication with Kilosa District Public Library staff, Morogoro 29/08/2002.
- 5 Note that adult members include the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) students
- 6 Personal communication with Morogoro regional Public library staff, Morogoro 03/01/2005
- 7 Personal communication with Morogoro regional Public Library staff, 29/08/2002
- 8 Personal communication with TLS headquarters staff in Dar es Salaam on 06/08/2002

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