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Women Empowerment redefined: A success story of Edward Ndlovu Memorial Library in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to highlight the success stories of the Edward Ndlovu Memorial Library community outreach programmes in Gwanda, a district found in Matabeleland South province in Zimbabwe. The library has been active in the building and development of community initiatives in rural and remote areas in Gwanda. The library established 29 study circle programmes which provide support to group activities in different parts of Gwanda. Some of the activities include making soap through Jatropha beans, vegetable and nutritional gardening, poultry, goat rearing and craft making. These activities have transformed the livelihoods of women living in one of the poorest communities in the country. Edward Ndlovu Memorial Library provides a perfect example of a framework of a community library that goes beyond its boundaries to provide a different kind of knowledge that empowers women, ‘the backbone all societies’.

1. Introduction
Community libraries serve many diverse functions. Besides being venues for the reading and lending of books, research by Herz and Spelling (2004); Shrestha (2013) and in the Mortenson Centre public lecture series (2013) has shown that community libraries are well placed to address issues of sustainability and the empowerment of women especially in rural communities. According to Sciabica (2014) community libraries offer an “integrated delivery model that provides women with a safe space and access to essential information on health, livelihoods, rights and more”. Edward Ndlovu Memorial library (ENML), located in one of the poorest, driest parts in Zimbabwe provides clear testimony on how libraries can be used as a viable place to attain positive transformation. ENML, is one library in Zimbabwe which has expanded its scope and made amicable strides in meeting the changing needs and
priorities of its community beyond the 2015 Millennium Development Goals. Through its approach of participatory development communication, which has been achieved by the establishment of study circle programmes, ENML has worked towards attaining millennium development goals number 1, 3 and 7 in Gwanda.

The application of the concept of participatory communication has enabled ENML to transform women and men’s perceptions of the challenges and problems they face to a vision embracing socio-economic and cultural rights to food, health and water access. According to Rogers (1986) cited by Servaes (1994) and Jacobson (1994), Participatory communication enhances the transfer of innovations from development agencies to their clients and creates an appetite for change through raising a climate for modernisation and evolution of attitudes towards social phenomenon among members of the public. Participatory communication is seen as "a necessary component, consistent with a democratic vision of international development, needed to increase projects sustainability and ensure genuine ownership by the so-called 'beneficiaries'." The approach is capable of facilitating people's involvement in decision-making about issues impacting their lives. It also addresses specific needs and priorities relevant to people and at the same time assisting in their empowerment. ENML uses provision of information to inspire people through the Study Circle developmental concept, which facilitates development through sharing experiences and working as groups in trying to mitigate poverty and the state of destitution. The Study Circle methodology has become the basis for cultivating democratic values, stimulating positive thoughts in learning, be it social or voluntary. This paper provides successful practices by ENML which have transformed the lives of women in Gwanda district. Women, who had been traditionally marginalised by the patriarchal status, now participate in household and community decision making processes. Women in the district also find themselves owning property and holding leadership positions in the community. They now have a voice in community meetings and they are no longer afraid to speak out as they are well informed.

2. About ENML

The Edward Ndlovu Memorial library was established in 1992 by the Edward Ndlovu Memorial Trust to honour the memory of the Member of Parliament for the area who died after a life-long commitment to the nationalist movement.
Its initial aim was to carry on his work for the development of Zimbabwe. Currently, the library runs various programmes, including reading to children and mothers at the local hospital, providing remedial tuition to children with reading difficulties, loaning books to prison inmates, and holding skills development workshops for teachers. It also serves as a distribution point for books donated by Book Aid International to institutions in Matabeleland South. The library carries out an outreach to 27 rural primary schools with book boxes. The library delivers book boxes containing 300 books each. The books are kept for a term and collected for repair and replacement during the school holidays. Through this programme they reach over 8000 children and several hundred teachers. The book boxes provide the only supplementary reading material for these children to improve their learning and academic performance. The library supports institutional libraries in the district. It has study circles and income generating projects in some of the 27 rural communities.
3. Location of ENML

The library is located in Gwanda district, found in the Matabeleland South province of Zimbabwe. Gwanda district is hot and dry with low and irregular rainfall, making the region unsuitable for cropping agriculture without irrigation. The slightly better areas are commercially operated ranches, while in the poorer parts with even less rainfall communal villagers struggle to subsist on herding cattle and goats. Every year they plant maize, sorghum, millet, groundnuts and pumpkins but only one in four years produces a decent crop. There are several gold mines in the district, two large ones close to Gwanda town and many small diggings. Many of the men and young people have immigrated to South Africa. Women constitute the bulk of the population in the area.

4. Redefining the role of women in Gwanda through the study circle methodology

The ENML established the Study Circles programme in 2008. Women constitute 98% of these study circles. Study circles are a tool used by ENMT to educate rural community members so as to bring about positive change in their lives. These education engagements stimulate and motivate discussion. Problems and their root causes are identified and solutions are agreed on. The tool promotes equality, dialogue, respect and tolerance. Currently the
programme has 29 such groups which meet regularly to discuss set themes, alongside provided guidelines. In the year 2014, the theme was “Rights, Food, Natural Resources and Trade” to which the groups were provided with relevant study material that supported their thematic discussions. The outcome of these discussions informed their activities that resulted in income generating projects. Through the study circle programmes, ENML made noticeable strides in Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, Promoting gender equality and empowerment of Women and Ensuring environmental sustainability respectively, number 1, 3 and 7 of the millennium development goals

ENML uses books to create solutions for women in communities. From all community programmes books are provided in the boxes for adults in the communities and the community health workers help them to form study circles. These groups use materials in the book boxes to learn about a specific area of production and small business planning and management. Thirty-one community groups are gradually shifting from subsistence to commercial production in such fields such as vegetable gardening, piggery, poultry, goat and cattle rearing and soap production. This gives members a small income with which to buy necessities and pay school fees alleviating them from abject poverty and dependency from donors. At some instance; the library sourced a book list of the following titles:

- ‘Indlela zokulima imibhida’ (Ways of growing vegetables) by Swedish Cooperative Centre,
- ‘Ukulinywa kwemihlobo etshiyeneyo yemibhida egoqela ikhabitshi, irepu, iKayili, amamatamatisi lehanyanisi’ (growing of a variety of vegetables including cabbages, rape, tomatoes and onions) by Phibeon Chigumira Ngwerume
- ‘Ukuhlanyela izihlahla ngamahlumela (growing trees uses using shoots)’ by Swedish Cooperative Centre.
- ‘Goat keeping for small scale farmers’ by Swedish Cooperative Centre
- ’Speak Out’, ‘Ukuqhotshwa kwemihlangano’ (how to conduct meetings) a book that became popular with a number of community leaders,

The Legal Resources Centre availed books

- The titles included on Women’s Rights,
- Child Rights and Child Abuse,
- Umthetho we Legal Age Majority,
- Making a Will, Isondlo, Birth certificates, Summons, Maintenance.

The provision of these books, written in Ndebele, the local language, helped women get information, which they used to revive their literacy levels, develop new skills and made informed agricultural and health decisions. The ENML report of 2014 revealed that, out of agricultural collection of booklets members from study circles gained indigenous agricultural information such as knowledge that there were biological methods of pest control such as the use of wood ash or putting sand in the dug holes for planting. They also learnt that trees do well when planted during the rainy season. The ENML report of 2014 also revealed that women in the study circles gained insights into environmental issues, where discussions centred on preventing veld fires, the indiscriminate cutting down of trees and over grazing. The report revealed that in one of the groups, after discussing issues relating to environment and health, women decided to construct Blair toilets and wash rooms. “They no longer go behind bushes for their toilet needs nor wait for the sun to go down to bath behind their huts” as previously witnessed in the community.

5. Income generating projects

5.1 Micro-Finance
ENML started assisting the study circle groups in 2011, with micro credit lines through setting up a revolving loan facility. This is an account run jointly by the Library Committee and the Study Circle members. Group members are loaned money to put up structures for their projects and they pay it back when profits start coming in.

5.2 Poultry
This is the most popular income generating project amongst the ENML Study Circles. Primarily the groups bred indigenous chickens but owing to length time of maturity and slow turnover they adopted keeping broilers which grow faster and have better markets. ENML helped with the construction of fowl runs through group members accessing the Revolving Loan Fund and undertook studies of various means of breeding different types of chickens. ENML introduced a 6m by 2.5m (15m 2) standard fowl run with 2 separate sections which can house 180 birds. A case of the poultry project is in Gwanda North, where a group called Ndonsakusa comprising of six female members embarked on building fowl runs in every
individual member’s homestead in a bid to increase output and maintain a constant supply to a restaurant in Gwanda Town. Group members meet to check on individual runs and share markets. Their chickens have two weeks interval, meaning that when one starts selling chickens to a restaurant in two weeks the other one continues and the next until all six have all sold and the rotation starts again. As part of improving their household property, Ndonsakusa group members in Gwanda North bought each member size 20 three legged pot, 2 blankets and paid fees for their dependents. Project members in this group have benefits of eggs, chicken meat and manure. Another Poultry group found is in Gwanda South. The group started in 2013 with 25 chicks using a small hut that they turned into fowl run. Currently the group managed to construct a proper fowl run with a carrying capacity of 125 chicks.

![Fig:3 Poultry from Ndonsakusa study group](image)

**5.3 Nutritional gardens**

In 2008 21 women formed the Sibambene nutrition garden project. They engaged in nutritional gardening projects with the aim of ridding themselves of poverty and being empowered economically. The women carried out studies on vegetable growing and made discussions on thematic issues like HIV/AIDS. ENML provided the group with a variety of vegetable seeds like butternut, pepper, English giant rape, tomatoes, carrots beetroot, potatoes and spinach. ENML monitored and advised group members accordingly. The produce from the gardens was sold out commercially. With the income gained, women in the group managed to build huts for their families. Most of these women did not have enough huts for
their children to sleep alone and to separate boys from girls. Group members also managed to
generate income to pay for school levies for their dependents.

Fig:4 Women from Sibambene study circle harvesting vegetables

5.4 Goat rearing
These started in 2009. Members were used to the traditional way of keeping goats where they
were released to roam the forest. Discussions and reading/studies increased the Groups’
knowledge of rearing these small livestock animals. Members learnt to pen the goats,
constructed roofed pens that have diamond wire to secure the goats. Members also learnt to
collect feed and store it in trenches/pits for use when goats are in pens. In 2009 three groups
had 16 goats and by 2014, 158 goats had passed through the members. ENML provides
support to the goat rearing groups by providing them with materials, trainings /workshops
and organizing field visits. Through these activities the groups received better management
skills and good practices of culling unproductive goats and ensuring successful mating.
International Crop Research Institute for Semi-AridTropics (ICRISAT) assisted these groups
by giving them fodder seeds which were harvested and fed to goats. The goats provide milk
and income to the women in the group.
5.5 Soap making
This group comprises of 5 women and 1 man. Members in the group make bath and laundry soaps and candles from jatropha oil. The soap is medicinal and can be used to cure sores such as ring worms. The soap and candles made from jatropha oil is sold to people in the community. Besides soap making, jatropha oil is also used to light lamps and the scent of the oil chases mosquitos at night.

Fig: 6 Jatropha beans grounded to make soap, Vaseline jelly and oil

5.6 Craft
This group specialises in craft making. The Craft groups added to their activities decorative art in their homes. At some instance, members in the group were introduced to a new form of craft which is decorating kitchens. This skill afforded individuals to be hired, thereby increasing their household income. One member went further and decorated her yard by planting shrubs and flowers, a good thing as this will reduce dust and bring in fresh air.

Fig: 7 Craft made from sisal plants and a mud stove and pot
6. Challenges

6.1 Lack of local support
Just like any other organisation, ENML faces a number of challenges. The library lacks local financial support to run most of its programmes. As the country is going through its own financial struggles, it is not easy for the government to support the library with financial resources.

6.2 Migration
Gwanda town is located near the Beitbridge border post, many of the men and young people have immigrated to South Africa.

6.3 Gold panning
There are several gold mines in the district, two large ones close to Gwanda town and many small diggings. Most young people in the area, including girls are engaging in illegal gold panning as a source of livelihood. They perceive gold mining as more attractive and sustaining than organised educational programmes provided by the library.

7. Recommendations for other community libraries
7.1 Participatory development communication approach
ENML has successfully promoted a participatory approach in development. They have done this through study circles where members of the community meet and share ideas on various topical issues. By attending the study circles, community members are able to contribute to the development of their own community and this has encouraged ownership of developmental issues. Members of the community would easily identify with the development taking place in their community and any solutions that are being offered in their communities in response to any needs or developmental gaps identified. The community itself is also able to come up with home grown solutions for their own developmental gaps without outside interference, thereby discouraging the dependency syndrome that most communities suffer from. Libraries are encouraged to take a similar approach to foster participation by community members in developmental issues in their own communities. Libraries can take the lead in bringing the community together to find solutions to developmental and other issues
7.2 Advocacy
Libraries can take a lead in the identification of opportunities and gaps in the community and take advantage of them for the benefit of the communities that they serve. Information is vital in any community and the library is the hub of information dissemination for any community. It is therefore imperative that they take a lead in advocating for development of their communities. ENML is a shining example of how a library can advocate for the development of the community using home grown solutions that ensure sustainability of developmental ideas. Libraries are encouraged to include advocacy issues in their activities to ensure that they take part in the development of the communities they serve.

7.3 Attitude engineering for rural communities
In an era where sustainable development has become topical and communities are encouraged to be independent, there is great need for attitude engineering for most rural communities to ensure that they rid themselves of the dependency syndrome. By providing information access and study circles like those being done at ENML, libraries can play a key role in achieving this. Members of the community are able to share vital developmental issues and ideas on projects that they can start without the usual outside interference. This usually results in developmental projects that the community has total ownership and thus are sustainable.

7.4 Translation of books to local languages
Most rural community members find it easier to appreciate literature that is written in the local language. There is need to have literature on developmental issues translated into local language for the benefit of the rural folk. Literature on agriculture and health issues was available in local some languages at ENML. However in some libraries, most of the literature is currently written in English and in most instances there is need for a translator for the benefit of community members. In the absence of such a translator the community members may find it difficult appreciate the literature.

7.5 Use of social media platforms for communicating
The Zimbabwean populace has taken giant strides in embracing technological advancements and the use of the several social media platforms for communicating. ENML has taken advantage of this and has formed groups for members on one of the social media platforms, whatsapp for them to communicate. Libraries are encouraged to take a leaf from ENML and
embrace the various social media platforms available for communication so that they easily disseminate information to members of the community. This would ensure that they reach most parts of the communities that they serve and may also reduce costs in terms of communication as the platforms are cheaper and have broadcasting advantages where the library can post one message and it reaches a big number of people.

7.6 Functional side of literacy
ENML believes in functional libraries. Libraries should provide material which can contribute towards the transformation of individuals.

8. Conclusion
Though located in one of the poorest and driest areas in Zimbabwe, Edward Ndlovu memorial library stands to show that libraries have the power and the potential to contribute to the development of communities. The success stories presented in the paper reflect a rich picture of significance changes in the lives of beneficiaries resulting from their participation in study circle groups. The stories reveal an improvement in income, health, food security, capacity and knowledge and reduction in stigma and discrimination. The researchers recommend the adoption of the participatory development communication approach by community libraries as done by ENML through the establishment of study circle programmes to enhance rural livelihoods.
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