Digital literacy, inclusivity and sustainable development in Africa

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This book has attracted my attention because of my recent involvement in several projects devoted to library development in African countries financed by Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Another reason to read it was the fact that the book is authored and edited exceptionally by African authors. To my mind, this is a positive sign to have a book by African library and information professionals and researchers given out by a specialized publisher mainly catering for professionals in the West.

The book contains 13 chapters provided by 22 authors from eight African countries. The editor Helena R. Asamoah-Hassan leads an influential organization, namely, African Library and Information Associations and Institutions. She has succeeded in attracting interesting and informative chapters from her colleagues, both from university researchers and practitioners. Of course, they are coming only from eight out of 58 African countries and dependent territories (Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, Botswana, Tunisia and Rwanda), however, some chapters cover regions and the first reviews the situation with digital technologies in all countries in Africa and reveal the worrying picture of digital gap among and within them.

There are several topics that are addressed in each chapter. One is obviously digital literacy. The definitions of the term and the concept itself as well as related terms (digital skills, digital competence, media literacy etc.) are taken up in all chapters. The differences between the definitions and conceptual approaches demonstrate the rich understanding of the phenomenon and a variety of concerns that are raised in connection with it.

Another important subject that is touched on in the book is the role and responsibility of libraries in relation to digital literacy. That is, of course, to be expected having in mind both publisher and the authors, but it also presents a very important and often neglected actor – a library, revealing many advantages that it has in developing digital competence and benefit that it brings to the society. The authors have written about university libraries and their role in higher education (Chapters 7, 8) and to some extent on national libraries and library authorities (Chapters 5, 6). When looking into the tables on internet penetration and usage (Chapter 1) it becomes quite obvious that the biggest problem lies beyond higher education system and stays with the broadest society that lacks resources, including all kinds of skills, not only digital literacy.

The third issue that emerges in many of the chapters relates to the Covid19 pandemic situation and quarantine that has brought the issues of connectivity, the importance of information and communication technologies to the fore. This, of course, has demanded much higher digital competence and new approaches from both, the service providers and the users, everywhere in the world. However, many African countries have experienced difficulties related to the basic infrastructural deficiencies, weakness of computer networks, not to speak of basic educational capacity, but have managed to move ahead in developing digital services as in the city of Johannesburg (Chapter 4) or the Thika District Library service in Kenya (Chapter 3).

The fourth common topic relates to education and digital literacy as a part of educational programmes as well as a concern for information and educational policy. Though many chapters again explore the higher education situations, however, education as a basic right is also addressed. We can see the chapters devoted to the training of children with hearing impairment (Chapter 9) or responsibility of communities (Chapter 10).

Many chapters are based on the literature review, document studies, official statistics, observations and personal experiences. Thus, we learn of different perspectives on the digital literacy issues in the libraries of different countries and existing problems, such as a direct relation between digital skills and wages in Tunisia (Chapter 2) or workplace productivity (Chapter 12), less direct dependency between local and indigenous knowledge and digital content (Chapters 10 and 11), or the application of backward design modelling for digital literacy in Africa. One of chapters based on original survey data presents a study of students' digital skills in Makerere University (Chapter 8). All in all, the book presents good quality texts that provide a rich picture of the issues faced by African countries.

What I have missed in the book is relating digital literacy to an overall literacy in local languages. There are some chapters mentioning the provision of content and services related to local issues or indigenous knowledge, however, the link between the overall literacy, the status of local languages and their importance for the development of societies is missed. To my mind this gap in the value orientation of African libraries is essential and equally dangerous as the digital divide that is outlined and understood in the book.

I would recommend this book for a wide audience of readers, first of all to those who are interested in international librarianship, need to broaden perspectives on digital and other literacies and those who study or are involved in initiatives supporting African librarianship.

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