



**EMPOWERING PEOPLE FOR LIFE;  
Vantaa-Windhoek library project**

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**Abstract**

*Vantaa City library has cooperated with the City of Windhoek since 2002. As a result of this co-operation a community library was established at Greenwell Matongo, an informal settlement area of Windhoek in 2005. One of the main tasks of the library co-operation is to bring free services of the information society to the grassroots level and bridge the digital divide among the residents of Windhoek. Partners in the project include the Namibian Ministry of Education and the University of Namibia. In 2007 the public library departments of Espoo and Helsinki cities joined the project to add human resources to it.*

*Over the years the Greenwell Matongo community library has become an important meeting place for the local people, especially schoolchildren and students. From the beginning the voice of the community was heard and which is why the library has become so popular among the community*

*members, most of who live in overcrowded homes, which often lack electricity, even tables and chairs, and thus do not provide for reading and studying. Today, Greenwell Matongo library is always full of students studying, reading books and newspapers, doing homework, using Internet, or attending life skills courses and other activities. The library has a reading room as well as a computer room with 23 computers. It provides regular computer courses, day camps for school children, storytelling hours and assistance with homework. The popularity of homework assistance has showed a need for an after school care program, whose piloting will be done in collaboration with some of the nearby schools.*

*The concept of the Greenwell Matongo community library has proved to meet the needs of the community members in it's neighbouring areas. The formerly disadvantaged people were not used to reading books and using libraries. The Greenwell Matongo library has become an important resource for the community. It provides a safe learning environment as well as material needed for doing school assignments. It has granted people an opportunity to access technological information and training through the computer room activities. In sum, the library is a safe place where everybody is welcome. It has become a multipurpose house and a model which will now be now replicated at another informal area of Windhoek, Nathaniel Maxulili.*

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## **Library services in Namibia**

Library services in Namibia fall primarily under the Ministry of Education through the Namibia Library and Information Directorate (NLAS). Before independence, which Namibia gained in March 1990, access to libraries was mainly a privilege of minority groups and the big majority had no access to such services. In Windhoek for example, there was only one public library, access to which was restricted to white people only, and located far from areas where most Windhoek residents live. In 2004, it was still the only public library in Windhoek. Currently, there are about 60 public libraries in Namibia, only a few of which are under the administration of municipalities.

The idea of libraries merely as lending places has been strong in Namibia, but little by little public libraries have also become important meeting places especially for children and students. In the past the libraries couldn't provide the people the information they needed and were considered as institutions that produced information to passive consumers. Now the role of the libraries has been defined anew so as to empower people from the disadvantaged communities to improve their quality of their lives. There is recognition that community libraries can become places for implementing different kind of human development projects if they are able to respond to the actual information needs of the people. Information has to reach the grass-roots level in order to really empower people. The library can only play a role in development if it provides services to all potential user groups in the community.

The changing perception and growing popularity of libraries means that in the future Namibia will need more qualified personnel to manage new libraries. The personnel of the public libraries tend to consist of library assistants with no formal qualification. Before, most of the librarians in Namibia had studied abroad but today it is possible to study information sciences also at the University of Namibia: the first librarians graduated from its Department of Information and Communication studies in 2004. Yet, getting qualified librarians to fill the positions of librarians remains a challenge. This not only due to shortage, but also due to that those who do have qualifications tend to go to better paid jobs in the private sector after finishing their studies.

## **Ten years of Vantaa-Windhoek library project**

The Vantaa-Windhoek Cooperation is a project between Vantaa, the fourth largest city in Finland and Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. The cooperation is a part of the North-South Local Authority Programme, financed by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administrated by the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities. The civil servants of the two cities carry out the cooperation. Both cities have dedicated managerial level staff to participate in the work. Vantaa-Windhoek Cooperation started in 2002, with libraries being among the first areas of co-operation.

In the framework of the project, Vantaa City Library started co-operating with the City of Windhoek, capital of Namibia, in 2002. The City of Windhoek had recognized a need to bring library services closer to the people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as Katutura, so as to promote a culture of reading, and further enhance access to information. The City entered into a partnership with the Ministry of Education of Namibia, the local community of Greenwell Matongo and the City of Vantaa to establish a Community Library at Greenwell Matongo Community Centre in Katutura. The plans were drafted in 2003 and construction finalized in 2004, after which the process of furnishing and equipping the library could start.

The Greenwell Matongo Community library was officially opened in March 2005. In 2007, also the public library departments of Espoo and Helsinki Cities joined the project, with the main responsibility still remaining with Vantaa. This not only added human resources to the project, but also serves as means of deepening the co-operation between the city libraries in the capital region of Finland.

The Greenwell Matongo Community Library is a joint venture of the City of Windhoek and the Ministry of Education. The Ministry provides the staff (library assistants), books and materials to the library whereas the municipality is in charge of the operation and the maintenance of the library facilities. The City of Windhoek has provided land and partly financed the construction of the Centre. The Vantaa-Windhoek co-operation project funds were used to supplement the construction costs and to purchase equipment for the library. Also the staff capacity building and the mentorship activities have been funded by the project. The City of Windhoek has recruited a Project Coordinator within the Division of Community Services, part of whose responsibilities are to look after and develop the operations of community libraries in Windhoek.

In 2008 a reading room and a computer lab with 23 computers were added to the library. After the expansion, the total area of the library grew to 230m<sup>2</sup>. The safety of the library was improved by installing alarm gates to the entrance as well as alarms to the books. In 2010 the City of Windhoek recruited a librarian to further develop the library. Besides her there is one library assistant and occasional trainees and volunteers working at the library. To recruit more permanent personnel to the library is on of the plans for the future.

One of the main tasks of the library co-operation was to bring free services of the information society to the grass-roots level and bridge the digital divide among the residents of Windhoek. Other objectives were to strengthen the administration of library services and the professional skills of the personnel and to strengthen the co-operation with other partners such as the University of Namibia and the Ministry of Education.

As a result of the co-operation, a thriving library and information centre is now functioning at Greenwell Matongo, an informal settlement area of Windhoek. The library serves school children and adults not only from the Greenwell Matongo community but also neighbouring communities in Katutura. The lending numbers of the Greenwell Matongo Library have been quite low due to the fact that in order to borrow material a membership fee is required. However, the number of library visitors has been steadily growing. The computers have been taken good care of, but there have been challenges with viruses and insufficient internet-connections. Also the children's department of the library has proven too small and would benefit from expansion.

## **Attention to user needs and functioning partnerships as keys to success**

To bring library services to the grass-roots level and to develop the library services based on the needs of the local people were the thrust when starting the Vantaa-Windhoek library project. The voice of the community was heard from the very beginning of the library planning, which largely explains the success of the Greenwell Matongo Community Library. Furthermore, there is a well functioning relationship between the City of Windhoek and the Ministry of Education, which helps to develop the operations of the library further. Emphasis is on training the administrative and library staff, bridging the digital divide, improving the library collections and equipment, improving customer education and promoting library services at large.

Co-operation with the University of Namibia has over the years enabled gathering of information and assessments of user needs. The university provides trainees to the library especially during holiday seasons. Professor Kingo Mchombu from Department of Information and Communication studies at the University of Namibia completed a survey on the information needs of the people in Greenwell Matongo. The study showed that the young people considered Greenwell Matongo Library as the most important information channel beside school when it comes to studying. Other studies also indicate that the Greenwell Matongo Library is important for the young people not only as an information channel but also as a meeting place. This recognition has had repercussions on the type of services that the Greenwell Matongo Library offers: it is much more than a library.

## **Community development approach to library services**

Community development seeks to empower individuals, families and groups of people by providing them with skills they need to effect change in their own lives, families and communities.

Information and library services in the contemporary societies have adopted a much more integrated developmental approach compared to the service provision in the past. The Greenwell Matongo Community Library was from the start planned as a community development oriented centre responsive in its service delivery, a center that focuses on active integration of the community. Over the years the library has in practice become much more than a library. It has organized several workshops in order to empower people to improve their quality of life. There have been workshops

on preparing healthy food, printing fabrics etc. Besides workshops there have been courses on how to search for information from books and on the Internet.

Children living in the densely populated Katutura and Khomasdal in Windhoek are mainly from households that are experiencing challenges of limited space, lack of electricity or limited access to electricity. The children live in areas where shebeens, alcohol outlets, are playing loud music to attract customers. This environment affects the learning and studying abilities of the children and youth.

Many children and young people come from dysfunctional families where unsupervised hours are the order of the day. It is known that when youth in urban areas spend a lot of time on the street, a group becomes the kind of surrogate family, but with a different set of norms. The street group is seen as an alternative group with specific norms and becomes a subculture. Once children are exposed to that culture they become involved in unproductive activities that negatively impact their school attendance and general performance. Young people need parental guidance and support and teenagers with poor family relations may use drugs even if their personal values and their peer's opinion are against drugs. Pressures from peers to use drugs can override personal anti drug values and even good family relations.

The unemployment rate of Namibia is estimated to be at around 52%. The residential areas from which most of the children and learners come from have especially high rates of unemployment. The community members are living in abject poverty, in overcrowded houses, not conducive for reading and studying. Electricity services are not available at household level and people, especially learners and students, use candles and oil lamps that are not healthy for study purposes. The academic performances of students living under these conditions tend to be poor.

According to surveys, young people in Greenwell Matongo area need information mostly about education and job opportunities. They are interested in information technology and health education so as to avoid illnesses such as AIDS. Other important information needs relate to motherhood and family planning, gender equality and environmental issues. To get this information they often turn to the Greenwell Matongo Library especially during holidays. They come to the library because it is near and because there are tables and chairs for studying, as well as access to Internet and other information sources like books and periodicals. Access to Internet is particularly important in a country where distance learning is the only possibility for many young people to earn a degree.

## **Promotion of computer literacy**

The global technological development has resulted to the need to address the digital divide. The efforts of the City of Windhoek are in accordance with the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) of the Ministry of Education. The programme is designed to address countrywide inequalities in access to meaningful information and learning resources, to promote ICT literacy and ensure the preservation and availability of knowledge created in public institutions. Namibia has a vision to turn the country into a knowledge based society by the year 2030 and the ICT plan for the community libraries is in line with that vision. The aim is to provide free public Internet access and to promote ICT literacy for the whole population.

Libraries need to further develop ICT services in a way that promotes equality in access to information. Libraries need to support education and social empowerment. Community libraries are expected to give basic ICT training for community members and hand out manuals for advanced software use. At the Greenwell Matongo Community Library basic Internet courses for school classes, students as well as adults are an ongoing practise. There has been a paid trainer at the library but also some volunteers have been taught to give basic ICT training to customers.

## **After School Care Programme**

An example of success stories in the Greenwell Matongo library are the after school activities initiated by the librarian who was appointed in 2010, who also took charge of running the programmes. The library started assisting library users, children, with school homework and guiding them in using the library effective as resource within the community. The benefits of the homework assistance initiative yielded so much fruit that the teachers from the neighbouring schools started referring more and more learners to the library for assistance, which resulted in an increased demand for these services.

The librarian and library staff came across a need for an integrated structured after school care programme. The need for specific subject tutoring was identified and the focus on mathematics, biology, physical science and reading was emphasised. The overall objective of the programme was to create an environment where learners are encouraged, supported and guided into developing their full potential. The programme aimed to promote values of caring, honesty, respect, responsibility

and trustworthiness. The Greenwell Matongo Community Library after school care programme incorporated recreational sports that actively and in a fun way enhances learning through instruments such as puzzles and chess games among others. The after school care programme was a pilot programme with some of the nearby primary and secondary schools.

In addition to the after school care programme the library has organized computer training for 5th and 6th graders and several awareness raising events and fun days for the children who don't have many possibilities for leisure activities. The backyard of the library has been improved so that the children can play football and engage in other outdoor activities, too. The expansion of the children's section is needed in the future.

## **A safe learning environment and a model for other libraries**

The Greenwell Matongo Community library is increasingly becoming a resource for the community. It provides a safe learning environment, material needed for doing academic assignments and access to computers. Also, the library personnel assist in guiding the users into effective ways of using the resources within the facility. The demand for the library facility is growing all the time. The Greenwell Matongo Community Library is every day packed with children and students doing homework, reading books, newspapers and magazines and using computers. The library offers regular computer courses for nearby schools, organizes storytelling hours, movie afternoons, book clubs, day camps, life skills courses and other activities for children and youth.

The Greenwell Matongo Community Library is not just a place for seeking information, it is also an important meeting place for the young people. In fact, the user statistics of Greenwell Matongo Library are well above those of the other community libraries in the country and therefore the concept of the Greenwell Matongo Library is now being used as a model by the Namibian Ministry of Education when planning its new libraries in other parts of the country. The Greenwell Matongo community Library will also serve as a model when establishing a community library in another parts of the city, such as the Nathaniel Maxuilili Centre at the informal settlement area of Babylon. The Ministry of Education has agreed to continue the good co-operation with the City of Windhoek by providing personnel and books also to the upcoming Nathaniel Maxuilili Centre Library. The

University of Namibia will continue placing library science students to conduct their practical training at both Greenwell Matongo and Nathaniel Maxuilili.

## **Co-operation plans for 2011-2013**

Vantaa-Windhoek library project has set the following objectives for 2011-2013:

- Expand the model of good library services, established and presently functioning at Greenwell Matongo Library, to Nathaniel Maxuilili Centre in Babylon.
- Continue bringing services of the knowledge based society through libraries to the grass-roots level and bridge the digital divide among the residents of the communities
- Provide peaceful and well-equipped environment for studying.
- Introduce children and young people to the library services.
- Improve the professional skills of the library and administrative personnel both in Windhoek and in Finland.

The Division of Community Development within the Department of Economic Development and Community Services is in charge of carrying out the activities related to this project. Ms. Trudy Geises, the project coordinator, is in charge of the activities. Activities are carried out in a close collaboration with the Namibian Ministry of Education, the Department of Information and Communication Studies of the University of Namibia and the residents of Greenwell Matongo and surrounding communities. The City of Vantaa Department of Education and Culture, Library Services is the Vantaa counterpart. The City Libraries of the City of Espoo and Helsinki are co-partners working under the supervision of Vantaa City Library in this project.

The mentorship programme of the Vantaa-Windhoek library project is regarded as important for the continuous development of the library services in Windhoek. The City of Windhoek strengthened the library administration by having filling the position of a community development officer with a qualified librarian in 2010, who will be familiarise herself with the Finnish library services to implement some of the lessons learnt into the local context.

The discussions and exchange of ideas between the various stakeholders have proved beneficial for all parties. The topics to be discussed also in the future are management and administrative issues, training the personnel, computer and information services, children's library work and co-operation

with schools, services for youth (especially girls), advocacy for libraries, library awareness raising and planning the future functions. Also additional material such as form of textbooks, books in indigenous languages, children's books and subjects recommended by the community members will be acquired by the project. Some computer equipment and material for children's activities will also be needed to ensure that the services run smoothly. Also a new Internet based library documentation system will be taken to use in the near future.

Special attention in the 2011-2013 period of the project will be paid to library promotion to youth. The rate of youth unemployment is very high and as a result the youth crime is also reaching a high level. Meeting places with secure environment and constructive alternatives for spending spare time are of great importance and the library is an ideal place for such activities. Therefore measures are taken to develop functions that are suitable for both girls and boys. Co-operation with stakeholders is sought for in Windhoek and experiences of youth work in the capital area libraries in Finland will be made use of. The gender aspect is taken into account by gathering information on issues who uses the library premises and for what end. Where gaps are identified and resources allow, the implementers try to address them.

## **Conclusion**

The concept of Greenwell Matongo Library has proved to meet the needs of the community members in its neighbouring areas. The services that the Greenwell Matongo Library offers mean that it is full of students studying, children reading and people using the computers every day. It offers people an access to survival information and provides an environment conducive to studying and reading. It has granted people an opportunity to access technological information and training through computer room activities.

Information sharing is an important part of the Vantaa-Windhoek co-operation. Regular discussions between the stakeholders are very important in order to further develop the co-operation between the City of Windhoek, The Ministry of Education and the University of Namibia. Co-operation between the library and the nearby schools has started successfully and will continue in the future. The library will organize free Internet courses to schools and the librarian has worked hard to create an environment where learners are encouraged, supported and guided to develop into their full potential. The annual plan of the library shows numerous activities at the library including

encounters with authors, arts and crafts workshops, public lectures, guest speakers, video shows, storytelling hours, book talk, tutoring facilitation etc.

Anyone who has had a privilege to visit the Greenwell Matongo Community Library can witness the empowering atmosphere and the amount of great work the library staff is doing for the benefit of the local community, especially for school children and students.