Civic engagement in the community-managed libraries in Oman

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Abstract

The current study aims to identify the practice of civic engagement in the community- managed libraries in Oman. Community-Managed library is an act of making the library space available for community's activities, by working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector and other public services. In addition, it is usually involving users as volunteers in the delivery of library services and the organization of activities, that supports and involves the community in various levels of decision making process, work around books and engage in public dialogues and deliberations.

A qualitative survey was used to identify the stakeholders' perception towards the adoption of civic engagement, as a method to develop and sustain these libraries. Stakeholders' suggestions to overcome the challenges, currently faced by these libraries were also identified. Triangulation method was used to gather information from social media of the libraries beside the open survey. It was discovered that, the six aspects of civic participation are practiced in the community-managed libraries' and seen in various activities and programs. However, the libraries founders must be motivated through appreciation and support from the government, private sector and other organizations, in order to develop their libraries and keep them sustainable. Finally, the community-managed libraries could model public libraries or serve as extension in the country.
Keywords: Community managed libraries, Community engagement, social capital, public libraries.

المشاركة المجتمعية في المكتبات الأهلية العامة بسلطنة عمان

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ملخص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى التعرف على ممارسة المشاركة المجتمعية في المكتبات التي تديرها المجتمعات المحلية في سلطنة عمان وتسمى بالمكتبات الأهلية. تأتي المكتبات الأهلية في سلطنة عمان كبديل للمكتبات العامة في المناطق التي لا تصـل اليها خدمات المكتبات العامة الممولة من الجهات الرسـمية. وهي مؤسـسـات تنشـأ من قبل الأهالي وتدار من قبل المتطوعين، ويتم تمويلها عن طريق الهبات والتبرعات والوقف. بالإضـــافة إلى ذلك، عادة ما يشـــرك المستفيدين كمتطوعين في تقديم خدمات المكتبة وتنظيم الأنشطة. وهي مؤسسات فاعلة الى جانب تقديمها لخدمات المكتبة العامة التقليدية المتمثلة في خدمات المعلومات والمعرفة، فهي أيضـــــا توفر مظاهر مختلفة من المشـــاركة المجتمعيـة كتوفير المكـان للندوات والحوارات والتوعية الى جانب تقديم التدريب في مجـالات التقنيـة كـالبرمجـة والروبوت خاصة للأطفال والناشئة.

تم استخدام المنهج النوعي في البحث من خلال استبانة مفتوحة تم توزيعها على ثلاث مكتبات مختارة لدراسة مظاهر الممارسة المجتمعية في هذه المكتبات ومقاربة ذلك مع الدراسات الأكاديمية السابقة. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن المكتبات الأهلية يمارس فيها مظاهر المشاركة المجتمعية من خلال الأنشطة والبرامج التي تقدمها للمجتمع. واختتمت الدراسة بمقترحات لتحفيز مؤسسي المكتبات من خلال التقدير والدعم من الحكومة والقطاع الخاص وكذلك مقترحات خاصة بتطوير المكتبات الأهلية وتجويد خدماتها واستدامتها.

Background and Related work

Despite that fast and easy communication through internet as a consequence of the CIT and mobile revolution, the need for cohesion and participation between people remain needed more than any other time. The public libraries in their initial establishment they hold reasons that maintain them to take a major role in the development of their localities. They are also the ideal places for information provision and participation with other support agencies related to support economic, social and cultural development of communities in general. As well as places for social networking and individual meetings.

This study chose community-managed libraries in Oman, which are always viewed as deficient in information services due to shortage in the materials and human resources. This may be true, but these libraries as they are established and run by volunteers, they are full of other important aspects related to community information services and community development. The CMLs in Oman are somehow practicing the new roles of public libraries being places for makerspace, robotics, programming, handcrafts, health awareness and recreational events and other programs.

This paper presents the definition of the civic engagement and its relation to public libraries. Then explore the aspects of the civic engagement as stated in the literature and what have been practiced in the CMLs in Oman. Finally, some points were given to the decision makers and other concern organizations to give attention and support these unique libraries in their mission, also some recommendation for the CMLs to enhance opportunities for their prosperity and sustainability.

What is the civic engagement?

The terms civic engagement, civic participation and community engagement and community participation have been used in most of the social science studies interchangeably. However, some scholars have differentiated the terms that, if anyone begins with word community or civic; as in the first, the initiative comes from and organization or government while in the second it comes from the public. According to the lexicon terms by (Financial Times, 2018) the "Community engagement is the process of working in collaboration with community groups to address issues, that impact the well-being of those groups".

While the "Civic engagement or civic participation is any individual or group activity, that addresses issues of public concern"(Checkoway & Aldana, 2013, p. 1894). Meanwhile, in the Arabic literature, one term is used for all (Almusharakah Alegtimaeyah) and the Arab social science scholars gave it the following meanings:

Sabir (1961, p. 166) Civic participation has been regarded as an act of citizens' involvement in the local development projects, based on their awareness of community demands and services considered critical for the development of the communities, governments and societies at large. In another definition by Mustafa (1986, p. 172) see civic participation as a process of active participation by individuals through free and conscious contributions. This is also considered as core elements for the development of civic engagement, in shaping the best lifestyle for the society in all aspects related to economic, social and politics. Also Dabis (2008, p. 65) defined civic participation as voluntary activities such as opinion, work and funding that are focused on problem solving and helping others, by supporting all development projects and programs in a lawful manner.

In this paper, the community-managed libraries initially are people and groups' initiatives, the term civic participation is used to describe the involvement of people and community in the library's activities and programs for the betterment of people life and the community at large.

THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC SERVICES

Based on the definitions above, we believe in the government responsibility to invest in building the public institutions. This is to motivate the spirit of communication, cooperation and collective performance among the citizenries by activating energies, in support of all development projects. This investment is to provide public services, for example, libraries that will be viewed as a yield of the public value and as well could be expected be given as the British Library that will creates value to be around 4.4 times of its public financing every year (Field & Tran, 2018, p. 7).
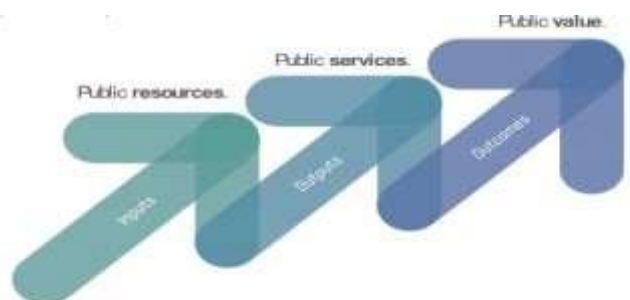
Adopted from: (Field & Tran, 2018)

THE FOLLOWING ARE AIMS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC SERVICES.

- To Participate in planning and implementation of responsibilities of the public services.
- To confirm that, planning for public services is based on people needs and demands.
- To ensure and enforce the responsibility and accountability for public services.

- To provide financial support for the public services.

- To educate and train community members on volunteering and teamwork.

- To contribute positively and effectively to the success and sustainability of public services.

- To consolidate the values of belonging and loyalty.

- To maintain values of compassion and friendship among the members of community. (Dabis, 2008; Ignatow et al., 2012; Johnson & Griffis, 2009; Kranich, 2005, 2012)

One of the best ever institution that could represent and play these roles ever is the public library.

The Relationship between public libraries and the civic engagement

The public libraries around the globe have been influenced by the budget cut and the effect of internet and information accessibility through cell phones. Luckily, because of studies and research, public libraries have possessed the capacity to beat the difficulties rose on the twentieth century and have changed the curse to a blessing and figured out how to obtain innovation advancement as a grant. However, Field and Tran (2018) claims that, socio-

economic demographics, and the demands of the twenty-first century introduced and still displays the opportunities and possible threat to the library sector. In any case, public libraries have changed their jobs from just perusing and issuing books to numerous aspects, subject to community needs. Subsequently, the public libraries have moved toward becoming spots for community meetings, makerspace, kids play groups, story-time, Technology use… and so on., so that, civic participation has come along with benefits and privilege that are always needed by the public library as listed below:

- The awareness of the library value and importance in providing services to the community.
- Adopting talents, innovators and people with special needs.
- Presenting models and spreading values.
- Increasing library attendance.
- Upgrading libraries buildings and get them ready to acquire future requirements.
- Helping the failed libraries to recover and start over and to be advanced.

The new demands have influenced on changing the public libraries roles and architecture to acquire: technology implementation and use, makerspace, café, training rooms, discussion rooms, exhibitions and meeting spaces. A Google search for "modern libraries" yields amazing and inspirational architectural wonders, all designed to provide for the needs of a new generation. (Field & Tran, 2018)

Fortunately, some of innovative examples could be seen in some of the community-managed libraries in Oman, such as: Manah Cultural centre library with science club and makerspace; Sheikh Mohsen Al Abri library in Alhamra with makerspace as well and crafts training lounge, also the makerspace in Ibra cultural centre library. There is no doubt these new ideas were embraced by the library buildings, based on the needs and demands of the library users (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Reid, 2012).

It could be said that, the aims of public libraries under the civic engagement concept will provide information services and building active citizens whom are informed and able to promote their views in many issues, related to community development.

 The public library, as a public institution is responsible for nurturing an active citizenry that is represented by citizen's willingness and ability to participate in the planning and also in accountability of public services and public rights.

The requirement for public libraries to lead the way

The traditional roles of public libraries are information access and information literacy, which are library-based services. Furthermore, the incorporation of civic engagement culture in library services has placed a new era of community-based services and communities have become the planners for public library services (Sung & Hepworth, 2013; Sunga & Hepworth, 2013). The studies of (CSV Consulting, 2006; Goulding, 2009; Kranich, 2005, 2012; Sung & Hepworth, 2013; Sunga & Hepworth, 2013) identified some practical aspects of community engagements that are common to library practices, which are currently being practiced, while the others included in their future plans. These aspects enable public libraries to revitalize their civic spirits, not only by providing space and information, but also by expanding opportunities for dialogue, public deliberation and shaping the civic library model as listed below:

- Public libraries as a community space.
- Partnerships.
- Community involvement in library services.
- Involvement of volunteers.
- Working around books or information.
- Engaging in public dialogues.

The public libraries have become places for meetings to discuss public matters that are related to the best type of life and services for the citizens, communities in the neighbourhood and the country in general.

Ever since civic engagement was included as part of public library plans, Government has promoted widely as government's agenda, also documented in the academic literature and empirical evidences. Furthermore, the importance of community involvement in service planning have increased in order to provide relevant and sustainable services.

THE PROBLEM

Despite the level of illiteracy in Oman that is about to be eradicated, the proportion of educated citizens is about 98% because of the compulsory education system and it is planned to be totally eradicated by year 2024 (Oman Daily, 8 January 2018), but the role

of public libraries is lacking.

Interestingly, there is an incredible receptiveness in the arrangement of technology innovation and with the abundance of cash, the ownership of a mobile phone associated with the Internet is accessible to most citizens and even kids in numerous families. Here untruths, the danger of bypassing the job of the public library, in giving precise and right information to people in the public arena, regardless of whether for their very own necessities or for their jobs in serving the community. The acceleration in technology will make it difficult for our children to acquire knowledge. Hence, we should work and accelerate the provision of learning, thinking, creativity and invention, otherwise we remain consumers for long periods.

In addition, there are manifestations of the evolution of civic engagement by the government in planning for the future and decision-making, through various means that includes the Municipal Council, the State Council initiatives and most recently the implementation of the Oman 2040 strategy.

Libraries should not be delayed and placed aside, sponsors should support public libraries in taking the role and attention as an important source of information, training and education. They should be provided with space, volunteers, reading activities… etc. The public library should become the community station and the source of accurate and reliable information.

The community-managed libraries in Oman are institutions, built by community members based on sense of loyalty and belongings. They are funded through contributions from the community members, private sector and library authority. Every library is an investment on civic engagement and people empowerment while the output will be gained as a public value to be seen in the current and future.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the aspects of the civic engagement being practiced at the community-managed libraries in Oman. At this stage, the civic engagement will be generally defined as: the involvement of the individuals and groups in the community managed libraries in terms of activities and programs, that impact their well-being and active citizenship.

METHODOLOGY/DESIGN:

This qualitative research is meant to identify the stakeholder's perception towards the adoption of the civic engagement as a method to develop and sustain these libraries. An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to selected community-managed libraries from three towns in the Interior Governorate in Oman, they are:

1- Al Nadwa Library in Bahla

2- Manah Library in Manah

3- Waqf Al Hamra in Al Hamra

The two pages questionnaire started the first part with demographic questions about libraries. In the second part the six civic engagement aspects were listed in open ended questions and the last part was asking about participants opinions on some general says about public libraries and civic engagement. The questioner was designed in Arabic and they were sent in .doc file along with guide of definitions and instructions to make it easier to be filled by participants. Two surveys were filled by participants alone and followed up by researcher for some details, while the third was filled with the present of the researcher in a way like an interview.

The unfolding analysis was followed, through manually analysing every questionnaire as soon as it has been received. The responses were coded, titled in segments and later in themes based on the six aspects of civic engagement. The Libraries are identified by symbols A, B, C respectively in the repot.

THE RESULTS

Before moving to the results, the current status of the community-managed libraries in Oman and the challenges facing them will be presented as follow:

The current status of community managed libraries in Oman

The absence of public libraries in the Sultanate of Oman has become an obvious phenomenon that remains visible and the scarcity has been discussed in the local literature (Karim, 1991; Mufaraji, 1992, 2000; Mujaini, 1994; Suqri, Kindi, & Saleem, 2017).

Perhaps, the unsatisfactorily current status of public libraries in the Sultanate of Oman and

the high financial cost required for establishing new libraries, have incited the government to authorize and encourage the communities in opening 'alternative' libraries through self- funding initiatives. These libraries are authorized by the Ministry of Heritage and culture and licensed under the ministerial decision no. 197/1996 which was updated by the decision no. 229/2007. The Ministerial decision identified these type of libraries as: "libraries founded by a group of people or an Omani legal entity" (Ministry of Heritage and Culture, 2007).

Although, the community-managed libraries in Oman are playing vital roles in both library side as public library service providers and in civic participation and involvement, yet, there is no academic study has documented their experience or services and the roles they play in society. However, this issue was regularly discussed in the local newspapers; Oman daily and Times of Oman. The deficiencies facing them was also being discussed as an important issue in some seminars joining the Muscat book fair that held on Feb-March annually. Eventually, the attention has been raised up to the parliament level when the issue of the opportunities and challenges of the public libraries was discussed at the State Council (Majlis Al Dawlah) on 13/1/2016 and it was end up with an unpublished report on the challenges facing the community-managed libraries (The State Council, 2017).

The challenges facing the community-managed libraries in Oman

The community-managed libraries in Oman are facing many deficiencies, that threatened their existence and force many to close. As adapted from The State Council report the challenges can be summed up in:

- An old and incomplete legislations that regulate and frame their work and activities. The last update was issued on 2007.
- The absent of the National library; which organize and network the public library service.

- No lands allocated in the urban plans for the establishment of libraries in convenient locations that allow access and frequency use, as the case of schools, Mosques, sport clubs, parks and other amenities.

- The majority are facing lack of infrastructure in the building and technical facilities.

- They rely on volunteers who miss commitment and experience. Rarely librarians are volunteering in these libraries.

- They rely solely in philanthropy and donations fund, that made them poor in providing information and services.

- the competition of the internet as an alternative information provider and its absence in these libraries.

- The short time of opening hours, many are closing their doors during weekend and on holidays.

- The informal of internal regulations in the libraries and absent of national standards and guidelines, which led to the weakness of cooperation between libraries.

- No registration or records kept for the library work, such as; the most read books, the topics covered and also, they are poor in collection developments and weak on marketing their services.

The report concluded with a call for an empirical study to overcome the obstacles and to find solutions for the development and sustainability of the community-managed libraries in the country.

Regardless of their deficiencies, these libraries are unique cases as they were built, run and developed as initiative projects by the community and open for the community. Moreover, they are very convenience places to conduct scientific research in: user studies, social capital, participative management, social informatics, community informatics and many other topics.

The libraries characteristics

Library	Date opened	No. books	Other materials	No. Volunteers
Al Nadwah Library (A)	1996	40000	3000	60
Manah Library (B)	1996	13000	1700	17
Waqf Al Hamra Library (C)	1998	10000	400	10

The selected libraries are quite similar in many things. As shown in the schedule above, they were opened a year before or after the issuing of the community-managed libraries license and they consist of more than 10000 titles while the licence required only 500 books. The three libraries also provide the core public library services and facilities such as: circulation, Wi-Fi, print & photocopying, user training and volunteer's professional development. Bearing in mind that most of these facilities are still missing in many other community-managed libraries in Oman.

THE PRACTICE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THESE LIBRARIES:

- Public libraries as a community space

Aabø and Audunson (2012) argued that users attend the public library to utilize the space beside services, hence the term third place is given to the public library after it is being an extension to the first place (home) and the second place (school or work). This demand has changed the library objectives to be a place for experience, involvement, empowerment and innovation. Accordingly, beside the traditional usage of library building for reading and training, the three libraries prepared their premises for other usage such as: meetings, lectures, and celebrations. The theatres and lecture rooms in these libraries are used by the

library volunteers and also booked by other community groups and organizations. This could be seen clearly in library C after it moved to the new building that contains of outside and inside theatre and classrooms.

Adding to that, the library tools and equipment are also checked out by other groups and organizations in the neighbourhood such as: sound equipment's, theatre tools, chairs, cameras…etc., that gives these libraries the practice of a new trend in public libraries called "The library of thinges".

The above gives an evidence that some community-managed libraries in Oman are moving beyond in using library space to support their new objectives: inspiration, learning, meeting and performance. This model was called by (Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen, & Skot-Hansen, 2012) "the four-space model".

- Partnerships

The public library should seek to develop a genuine partnership with other community organizations and work together to enable greater social inclusion in the information

society (Kendall & Wilkinson, 1998). The three libraries as they are based in small towns, they managed to build a good cooperation with other government organizations and local groups around them. "we are connected with the other organizations around the library such as: schools, health centre, municipality, governor office, volunteer groups, sport club, Zakat committee, Shura Committees and the town council" (A). "This worked to stimulate social and cultural mobility in the library in addition to obtaining some financial support for the implementation of activities and programs" (B).

- Community involvement in the library service

The services and programs in the community-managed libraries are organized, run and owned by the community individuals and groups. Also, most of decisions made related to building expansion or re-arrangement, books selection, and extending operation hours were taken based on people suggestions and recommendations. Indeed, advices and feedback are received through daily conversation, suggestion boxes and through social media" (A,C).

- Involvement of volunteers

The volunteers, for a long time, have been working in public libraries providing services and running activities especially in the outreach and mobile services (Goulding, 2009). As a fact, in most developed countries the volunteers embrace public library culture (Casselden, Pickard, Walton, & McLeod, 2017, p. 12).

The Omani society is distinguished by its high human characteristics and its authentic values of faith and socialism, which has shown its willingness to volunteer in many circumstances, including climatic conditions and to extend aid to others outside the country. More, the volunteering in Oman includes the establishment of public projects (educational, health, public services …etc), as well as ensuring orphans, and giving charity to the poor, and caring for people with special needs (salmi, 2018). The community-managed library is an example of volunteering in public services in Oman.

The unique about the community-managed libraries in Oman "they are found and run by public and open for public" (B). "These libraries are found and run by volunteers; whom also organize activities and provide library facilities" (C). This gives them the nature of civic engagement at their core.

Therefore, volunteering in this sector needs to be re-organized. Casselden et al. (2017) suggested to public libraries to follow a formal mechanism in terms of recruitment,

selection and training of volunteers in order to ensure that public libraries get the best out of this resource. Hence, the volunteers should sign an agreement with the library to be aware of their rights and responsibilities. They also have to show commitment, loyalty and ownership to library programs and ensure service quality.

- Working around books or information

The books and activities around books represent the core service at the public libraries. There are variance activities seen among the three libraries that are related to books. They organize reading competitions for children every summer and also organize reading workshops for children and adults to encourage reading and library attendance. Furthermore, they exhibit the new arrivals at the entrance and review them in the social media too under the Title: "book from the shelve". However, the community-managed libraries could seek the government and private sector support to run the reading campaigns and programs such as book of the day, inviting book writers and group reading.

Also, they could target outreach activities and run mobile library services.

- Engaging in public dialogues

The public libraries have become places for meetings to discuss public matters related to the best life and services for people and communities (Aabø & Audunson, 2012; Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010). However, in Oman Suqri et al. (2017, p. 375) suggested for the Omani public libraries to provide meeting rooms to encourage and facilitate citizen involvement and engagement in community issues. That suggestion is already followed by some of the community-managed libraries that have new buildings. They have specified places for talks and discussion within allowed levels. An example of this is "Al-Manhal" in one of the libraries. It is a lecture on a topic of interest to community that is organized every two weeks and ends with discussions. Furthermore, positions in libraries are held by people who are trusted by the community, whom are also involved as members in different committees in the city council. "some of us are members in committees such as road safety, child rights and town consultation committee" (A).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative study has explored some of the civic engagement aspects that are being practiced in the community-managed libraries in Oman. However, the civic engagement in these libraries need to be promoted widely through government's agenda, academic literature and empirical evidences. It is recommended that, further studies on this issue could bring some solutions for the problems that are facing these amazing libraries.

The win-win approach should be followed by the government, community and the library in order to acquire and develop the civic engagement aspects in order to:

- Expanding the establishment of community-managed libraries and establishing branches in villages and remote areas.
- Increasing support and fund to raise up libraries' performance.

Finally, the emphasis to help the community-managed libraries to solve their problems and be effective in the civic engagement and community development, the researcher recommends the following:

- Understand the Community management practice

The community management of the public amenities does not mean that services will be provided by the community alone without the need for support from the government and the private sector, but it is a point of contact between the three sectors as shown below. Similarly, the community-managed library refers to the authority-led community library (Abu & Haron, 2018; Cavanagh, 2017).
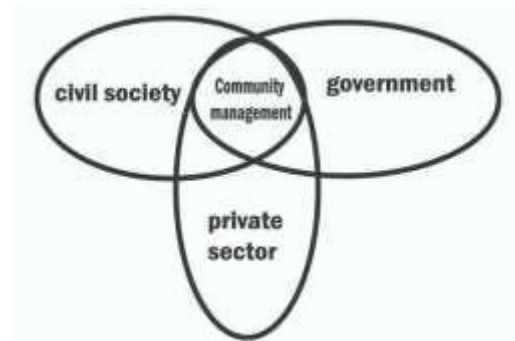
- Investment in developing community-managed libraries

The government and the private sector have the responsibility of investment in the infrastructure and to provide a continuous financial support for these libraries to enable them presenting new facilities, convenience programs and sustainable services.

- The library related authorities' responsibility toward community-managed libraries

The Omani library association, Library science department and Public library department at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture are responsible towards the community-managed libraries in:

- To advocate community-managed libraries through: Encouraging librarians to volunteer in these libraries and Organize campaigns to promote these libraries at national level.

- To grant the community-managed libraries the responsibility of providing public library services and community information services under contracts and agreements.

- To improve the overview of community-managed libraries among public and decision makers.

- To help the community-managed libraries to change and re-arrange their affairs and guide them on how to market themselves through web 2.0 technologies and advertisement campaigns.

- To Support libraries to be ready to play the role and lead in civic engagement.

It is also recommended for the community-managed libraries in Oman to explicit their plans and include the new practices being performed such as civic engagement, community information services and community informatics. Also, they have to advantage all chances and be involved and not to be delayed from opportunities provided by other authorities such as**:**

- Shura council initiatives.
- City council initiatives.
- E-government and digital Oman strategies.
- The Youth National commission activities.
- The SME activities.
- Oman 2040 strategy campaigns.

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