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Published by Faculty of Adab and Humanities

Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia

Website : <http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/insaniyat> | **Email :** journal.insaniyat@uinjkt.ac.id

e-ISSN : 2541-500X

p-ISSN : 2614-6010



INSANIYAT

Journal of Islam and Humanities

Vol. 9(2) May 2025



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<https://doi.org/10.15408/insaniyat.v9i2.41653>

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<https://doi.org/10.15408/insaniyat.v9i2.42244>



Challenges and Impacts of The Absence of Public Libraries in Rural South Africa

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of a rural community's lack of a public library. Access to reliable and relevant information is essential for making informed decisions towards achieving educational and developmental goals. Public libraries contribute to social and economic development by offering information vital for informed participation in societal activities, including access to opportunities. The study employed a qualitative research method, with fifty participants selected through purposive sampling from various categories within the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga, Mpumalanga South Africa. Data were collected through structured interviews and focus groups and then analysed using thematic analysis. The study found a significant need for a public library in the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga. The lack of access to information, education, and support materials negatively affects the community's educational, social, cultural, and economic well-being. Based on this finding, the study recommends the establishment of a well-resourced, maintained and regularly updated public library to meet the information needs of the different populations that make up the community. Villages surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga should form a community group to promote the establishment of a public library or library services, collaborate with local schools to improve library resources and encourage community use after school hours and collaborate with local organizations to create a mobile library that transports books and resources to various community locations.

Keywords: Information, Public library, Rural area.

How to cite: Mashilo, S., Mdhlalose, D., & Schellnack-Kelly, I. (2025). Challenges and Impacts of The Absence of Public Libraries in Rural South Africa. *Insaniyat: Journal of Islam and Humanities*, 9(2), 107–122. <https://doi.org/10.15408/insaniyat.v9i2.42735>

Introduction

For ages, public libraries have played a crucial role in society by providing free spaces and equitable access to materials for education, accessibility to knowledge human interaction and recreational purposes (Bouaamri, 2023; Kumar, 2023). They encourage self-directed and structured learning in all forms of education (Balapanidou, 2015). Public libraries, particularly public and community libraries, serve as a symbol for disseminating information



that promotes social cohesion and peace in local communities. These establishments enable people to interact and meet in a common area, frequently bolstered by communal resources and cultural history (Panda & Das, 2023). Information centres and libraries are key to community development, stability, liberty, and empowerment (Muchaonyerwa et al., 2021). As for such public libraries constitute one of the foremost organisations that help promote digital inclusion because they offer free use of information and communication technologies and internet access, train individuals in society in digital competencies, develop and make digital services and products available, and carry out a variety of digital inclusion campaigns, including projects and events that focus mainly at the groups that are least in need of digital inclusion (Real, 2021; Strover et al., 2020). Still, putting digital inclusion plans into practice is challenging, and public libraries may have trouble reaching their target customers, modifying their services, and ensuring the long-term viability of these efforts (Kulikauskienė & Šaparnienė, 2023).

Public libraries are social organisations crucial to the development and community's growth by providing inhabitants with access to needed information (Maurya, 2016). This is true since access to information is a fundamental component of individual and societal development (Maurya, 2016; Mugwisi et al., 2016). For almost a century, educational technology has been marketed as a cutting-edge approach to education since it may improve instruction and the learning process for students, which eventually improves learning outcomes (Sanfo & Malgoubri, 2023). As science advances and human civilization evolves to meet the demands of its citizens, so does educational technology. Education players must study more thoroughly, swiftly, effectively, and competitively to construct learning across community education that is methodically organized in innovation within the curriculum (Mursid et al., 2021). Rural students frequently deal with issues like poor digital literacy, restricted access to technology, and erratic Internet connections, each of these worsens educational disparities (Mahwasane & Mudzielwana, 2016; Xu, 2024). Information is a necessary component of everyday life, and the demand for information is widespread across several societies and backgrounds. In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, the need for information has grown even more vital. Public libraries have a vital role to play in directly providing information to developing communities and contributing to daily survival through social and economic development.

Beyond their educational and cultural significance, public libraries also have a crucial impact on the local economy, and they support the revitalisation and growth of the community's economic landscape by providing information and resources (Soliman & Wei, 2016). Wang (2024) states that public libraries have economic and social impact and contribute to the development of the economy including offering resources for entrepreneurs, facilitating access to job search platforms, and providing career development services. To this end, Mugwisi et al. (2016) posit that public libraries serve as community hubs where individuals can freely access various resources and information. Recognising the pressing need to address these challenges and providing public libraries in rural areas can profoundly enhance rural communities' overall development and quality of life. Otoló (2022) postulates that establishing public libraries in rural areas can bridge the gap in access to information and educational resources while contributing to the economic development of the communities. Admittedly, various challenges bewilder the provision of public libraries in rural areas. Particularly in South Africa, Bopape et al. (2021) posit that the challenges with the provision of public libraries have been an ongoing issue, mainly due to the marginalisation of rural communities during the apartheid era. Government support for establishing public libraries in rural areas is limited and, in certain instances, non-existent as they prioritise funding for other sectors and allocate insufficient funds that do not enable the provision of public

libraries in rural areas.

Illiteracy also affects library provision in rural areas, as stakeholders show negative attitudes towards library policies, and rural dwellers often lack interest in patronising rural libraries, the lack of personnel willing to relocate to rural areas to establish public libraries due to poor remuneration and lack of attractive welfare packages impedes the establishment of rural libraries (Adepoju & Akobe, 2023). Adkins et al. (2014) point out that community demographics also influence the establishment of new public libraries. Hence poor rural community dwellers are more likely to be affected by these library developments. This observation underscores the potential role of public libraries in promoting social equity by providing access to resources and opportunities for those who may be socioeconomically disadvantaged. Addressing these challenges associated with public library provision in rural areas requires a comprehensive approach. Mohammed (2019) and Mamman (2015) strongly advocate for sufficient government funding to establish public libraries to meet society's information needs. The lack of accessible library services in rural areas creates an information gap and hinders educational opportunities. The study aims to bridge this research gap by investigating the factors affecting the provision of public libraries in the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga.

The rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga are without a public library, and thus its community members face significant challenges in meeting their life goals. Sambo (2018) states that the lack of a public library in rural areas hinders the residents from fulfilling their educational, employment, safety, health, and leisure goals. There is a pressing need to understand the impact of this lack of a public library on the community, identify the barriers to its implementation, and determine the success factors necessary for its establishment. Without addressing these challenges, the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga remain disadvantaged, unable to fully harness the potential benefits a public library can bring in promoting literacy, knowledge acquisition, community engagement, and cultural preservation. Access to information is crucial for developing informed and prosperous societies (Mugwisi et al., 2016). Most rural communities lack public libraries despite their significant social and economic development significance. As a result, people residing in rural areas often face substantial challenges in fulfilling their information needs, which negatively impacts the community. A comprehensive investigation is required to provide valuable insights and guidelines for implementing a public library. This study aims to address information disparities and enhance the overall well-being of the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga by investigating the challenges and impact of the lack of a public library and providing comprehensive guidelines for successfully implementing a public library in a rural area. By examining the impact of the lack of a public library, the study seeks to shed light on the community's information needs and the potential benefits that a public library can bring.

Method

Qualitative research was deemed suitable for this study due to several reasons. Firstly, the nature of the research problem necessitated an in-depth exploration and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Qualitative research allows for exploring complex phenomena and generating new insights and theories (Brinkmann, 2018:1018). By adopting a qualitative approach, the research captured the rich, detailed narratives and subjective meanings associated with this complex social issue of a lack of a public library in rural areas and its effects on community development (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:4; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019:28). For this study, the population is the community members living in rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga for whom a public library is supposed to serve. Consequently, the population of this study encompass varied categories of people from different backgrounds,

such as older people, adults, youth, teenagers and children, based on the geographical and content scope of the study. Fifty participants were selected through purposive sampling from various categories within the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga. Data were collected through structured interviews and focus groups and then analysed using thematic analysis.

Data was transcribed and translated into the English language, the researchers referred to personal notes that were taken during and after interviews and focus group discussions to understand different specific responses. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse data using Atlas.ti (version 8) Software. The use of Atlas.ti software provided efficient data management and allowed for a deeper exploration of the meaning of recorded data (Manyerere, 2015). Atlas.ti enabled the coding and analysis of different media types, such as text, images, videos, and audio (Wästerfors et al., 2014). It was used in this study to import sources, code and analyse data using nodes and classifications, providing a clear visualisation of the research findings. This software will facilitate the description and testing of themes in the data and uncover patterns that may not be evident through manual analysis. The responses were analysed to identify similarities and differences in the research participants' perceptions regarding the research questions.

Results and Discussions

Information Needs of Rural Community

Individuals manifest a range of information needs in their everyday lives. Once information needs are identified, individuals search for relevant information. Various factors, such as social, cultural, and economic realities, can influence these individual information needs. Age, education level, gender, and income can shape information needs (Masinde et al., 2020). The rural communities' diverse needs also encompass specialised services for different groups of people (Matodzi, 2018). Rural communities need e-government services such as online birth registrations, employment forms, and university admissions, including printing, photocopying, and video conferencing (Matodzi, 2018). Schrag et al. (2015) emphasise that the information needs of various groups within rural communities can be better understood by assessing the impact of public libraries on users' lives. These needs range from day-to-day information about the local community to exchange rates and weather (Mittal et al., 2018). Libraries provide complimentary newspapers and authoritative information on education, health, governance, and government matters. Ensuring free and reliable internet access becomes crucial in rural areas, where resources are often limited (Bopape et al., 2017). Philbin et al. (2019) note that public libraries are essential community-level resources that advance population health; hence, the necessity for libraries to provide information that educates and contributes to the community's overall well-being. This emphasises the significance of public libraries in disseminating health-related information, particularly in rural areas where access to healthcare information can be limited.

Role of Public Libraries in Rural Areas

Public libraries are often considered essential community institutions, serving as hubs for education, cultural enrichment, and community engagement. While their significance is widely recognised, it is mainly pronounced in rural regions where access to services and resources may be limited. Public libraries, especially in rural areas, have evolved into cultural and social institutions offering a wide range of resources serving as intellectual hubs (Lal, 2018). Public libraries provide a variety of resources and educational programs, including books, computers, and educational workshops, thereby complementing formal education systems (Bouaamri et al., 2022).

These resources cater to learners of all ages, from children seeking homework help to adults pursuing lifelong learning opportunities (Bertot et al., 2016). Public libraries often collaborate with local schools and educational organisations to enhance learning outcomes in rural communities (Hart, 2021). Bopape et al. (2021) emphasise that students and villagers have direct access to the library staff who can facilitate and guide them more competently in rural public libraries. In rural areas, access to information is often constrained due to geographic isolation and limited internet connectivity. Public libraries bridge this gap by offering free access to various information resources, including books, newspapers, magazines, and online databases (Agyekum et al., 2016). Libraries in rural areas have expanded their role to provide high-speed internet connections, which are often challenging to obtain outside urban centres (Maja & Motseke, 2022). Public libraries empower rural residents by providing assistance with information retrieval and digital literacy training, fostering information autonomy and empowerment (Bertot et al., 2016). Through various programmes and events, such as book clubs, community forums, and cultural exhibitions, libraries bring people together and promote social cohesion (Hart, 2021).

Public libraries often serve as multipurpose spaces for community gatherings, meetings, and local events (Barclay, 2017), contributing to rural communities' vibrancy and resilience (Vårheim, 2017). In rural areas where social isolation and marginalisation are prevalent, public libraries promote social inclusion and equity. Through the provision of a welcoming and accessible environment for all clientele, irrespective of socioeconomic status or background, libraries help mitigate social barriers and promote inclusivity (Bertot et al., 2016). Libraries often offer specialised services for vulnerable populations (Olatoye et al., 2021), such as outreach programs for seniors or literacy programs for immigrants, thereby addressing specific needs and enhancing social equity (Stilwell, 2016). Several effective models for implementing rural libraries are rural communities, particularly those that have scant availability of stationary libraries, which can benefit directly from the resources that mobile libraries provide. To provide books, digital resources, and community programming in rural places, these libraries frequently use automobiles (Whelan, 2014). Villages and libraries collaborate closely to customize services to meet their unique needs. Effective rural libraries regularly collaborate with schools, charitable organizations, and regional governments to enhance their accessibility and resources. These partnerships have the potential to improve programming and generate more money (Lankers, 2016).

Challenges in the Provision of Public Libraries in Rural Areas

Establishing public libraries in rural areas poses unique challenges due to the scarcity of resources and financial constraints. Rural communities often need more financial resources compared to their urban counterparts. This scarcity encompasses not only financial resources but also human capital, infrastructure, and technological support. One of the primary challenges in establishing public libraries in rural areas is the scarcity of adequate resources, both financial and human (Mia, 2020). These resources are limited or prioritised in many rural areas for other pressing needs. Strand (2016) states that financial constraints significantly hinder establishing and maintaining public library services in rural areas. Lehman (2014) asserts that government and relevant departments do not factor in this regard when allocating budgets for public libraries provision. As the economic conditions worsen, public libraries often withstand the worst of budget reductions, primarily because they are deemed a low priority by the government. This financial neglect led to the sluggish development of public libraries due to the scarcity of sufficient funds. This situation underscores the critical role of economic stability in the growth and sustainability of public libraries.

Economic instability often leads to budget cuts, affecting libraries' ability to provide quality services. Hence, funding for infrastructure, collection development, staffing, and operational expenses poses a significant hurdle in public library provision in rural areas. Rural areas may lack sufficient tax revenue to support public library operations because of lower land values, lower average salaries, and a higher proportion of retired individuals (Real & Rose, 2017). Socioeconomic factors also play a role in such that the demand for library services may be low in areas where illiteracy, unemployment and poverty are prevalent. People struggling with basic needs may not see the value of libraries, leading to low usage and support for establishing these institutions (Bopape et al., 2021). Infrastructure limitations pose another obstacle to establishing public libraries in rural areas. Many rural communities lack suitable buildings or spaces that can be repurposed for library use. The absence of appropriate infrastructure in rural areas makes it challenging to find or develop spaces that meet the needs of a modern library (Mamabolo & Durodolu, 2023). Improved road conditions enable public libraries to provide adequate information services, especially in rural communities lacking fixed library structures (Mojapelo, 2014). Enhanced roadways also facilitate more accessible access to public or community libraries via buses, taxis, or trains, meeting the information needs of diverse populations. Conversely, poor road conditions pose significant challenges for implementing public libraries, hindering their ability to serve communities effectively.

In our digital society, effective telecommunications infrastructure is vital for delivering library and information services. While cell phones may be available, traditional telephone systems are often ineffective in these communities, limiting library communication, including activities like interlibrary loans (Mojapelo, 2014). Statistics South Africa (2012) reports that fewer than 10% of South African households have internet access at home, highlighting the significant gap in internet connectivity. The absence of telecommunications infrastructure in many rural areas presents a considerable challenge in accessing online information resources and databases (Mojapelo, 2014). Without proper infrastructure, users are deprived of opportunities to benefit from global electronic information. The cumbersome procurement procedures represent a significant challenge in providing public libraries, particularly in rural areas. The complexity and inefficiency of these processes can be attributed to the involvement of individuals who may not be fully acquainted with the nuances of the library environment. As Nkondo et al. (2014) highlight, this lack of understanding can lead to awarding tenders to companies not well versed in library-specific needs, thereby obstructing the smooth and effective acquisition of resources. Mapulanga (2015) delves into the effect of public procurement legislation on acquiring library materials in academic libraries in Malawi, highlighting the adverse effects of independent procurement methods that result in inconsistent pricing and disregard for value for money. This situation is exacerbated in rural areas where libraries may not have the bargaining power or expertise to negotiate better terms with suppliers.

In their comprehensive overview of public procurement, Grandia and Volker (2023) stress the complexities and the essential tools required for creating public value through procurement in the public sector. They underscore the necessity for procurement professionals to act as change agents, a principle particularly pertinent for rural libraries seeking to overcome procurement challenges. To this end, Schotanus (2023) opines that organising public procurement and developing a procurement policy that aligns with the organisation's goals. This means establishing procurement practices for rural libraries, considering the constrained financial and human resources available while ensuring access to an extensive range of library resources. Ineffective procurement procedures can lead to several adverse outcomes for the provision of public libraries in rural areas. These include

delays in acquiring materials, limited access to diverse resources, and financial inefficiencies that strain already limited budgets. The result is a library service that struggles to meet the needs of its community, which can have broader implications for education and literacy in rural areas.

The sparse population density in rural areas presents a unique challenge for establishing public libraries. Low population density results in fewer potential library users, making it difficult to justify the investment in library establishment and services (Bertot et al., 2016). As a result, policymakers may prioritise allocating resources to areas with higher population densities, leaving rural communities underserved. The digital divide exacerbates challenges in providing library services to rural areas. Bertot et al. (2016) noted that disparities in internet access and digital literacy skills are more visible in rural communities than in urban areas. Limited access to technology and high-speed internet inhibits rural residents' capacity to benefit from digital library resources and online services (Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022; Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). Bridging the digital gap demands targeted investments in broadband infrastructure and digital literacy programs (Hollman et al., 2021), which may be lacking in rural areas due to resource constraints (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Real and Rose (2017) state that rural libraries often struggle to attract professionals with the necessary expertise and qualifications. Limited job opportunities, lower salaries, and fewer professional development opportunities contribute to difficulties in adequately staffing rural libraries (Ndebele et al., 2016). As a result, rural libraries may operate with limited personnel or rely on volunteers, impacting the quality and scope of services they can offer (Real & Rose, 2017). Consequently, these challenges outlined above show the multifaceted obstacles that need to be addressed to ensure the establishment of public libraries in rural areas.

Impact of the Absence of Public Libraries in Rural Areas

Public libraries serve as vital hubs for community development, education, and access to information. However, the absence of public libraries in rural areas poses significant challenges. It has far-reaching impacts on the residents and the overall development of these regions, particularly in terms of social, educational, and economic aspects. These impacts are isolated incidents and have far-reaching consequences that can affect generations. In rural regions where access to educational materials may be limited, the absence of public libraries exacerbates educational inequalities. Hence, rural students may lack the resources to succeed academically without library access, hindering their long-term educational outcomes. Bertot et al. (2016) note that rural libraries have historically been essential for literacy development, especially when formal education opportunities are scarce. Jiyane and Sokhela (2023) opine that public libraries contribute significantly to educational outcomes; this contribution goes beyond individual academic success; it has broader societal implications for creating an educated, informed, and capable citizenry. The absence of public libraries can severely limit access to information and learning resources, particularly in rural areas where other resources might be scarce. Garaba and Mohammed (2019) explore the usage of information sources and services in rural Nigerian libraries, emphasising how these resources support educational endeavours. Without access to diverse books, periodicals, and digital resources that libraries provide, students and lifelong learners in rural areas may face significant barriers in their educational journey. This limitation can result in lower literacy rates, reduced educational attainment, and a widening educational gap between rural and urban areas.

The absence of public libraries in rural areas also has economic implications; they are more than just storage of books; they are essential community centres that provide access to an extensive range of resources and services, including digital technologies (Real & Rose, 2017). These resources and services can contribute significantly to economic development in

rural areas. Without access to these resources, rural residents may face barriers to economic mobility and employment opportunities. Lacking libraries may deter businesses from investing in rural communities, perpetuating economic disparities. Public libraries can play an instrumental role in bolstering local commerce. They provide access to business-related information and resources, offer spaces for business meetings and networking events, and can even provide training and support for entrepreneurs (Real & Rose, 2017). Public libraries can contribute to the economy by supporting education and workforce development. They provide access to educational resources, offer literacy and skills training programs, and can serve as venues for job fairs and other employment-related events (Wang, 2024). Public libraries can also have a direct economic impact by creating jobs and contributing to the local tax base. They employ librarians, support staff, and sometimes volunteers to purchase products and services from local enterprises (Real & Rose, 2017).

The absence of public libraries in rural areas can significantly contribute to social isolation, which can have profound implications for individuals and communities. Public libraries serve as crucial community hubs, providing opportunities and access to information for social interaction and community engagement (Bouaamri et al., 2022; Philbin et al., 2019). Rural libraries are centres for community engagement, bridging gaps and promoting social well-being (Dent, 2014). Their absence in rural areas exacerbates social isolation. Residents miss out on cultural events, workshops, and networking opportunities. Public libraries are important social institutions supporting educational systems and fostering social inclusion (Bouaamri et al., 2022). They provide a space where individuals can meet, interact, and engage in communal activities, fostering a sense of community and reducing isolation (Philbin et al., 2019). In rural areas, where opportunities for social interaction may be limited, the role of public libraries in mitigating social isolation becomes even more critical (Bopape et al., 2021; Real & Rose, 2017). The absence of these institutions in rural areas can exacerbate feelings of social isolation. Without a central hub for community interaction and access to information, rural residents may feel disconnected from their communities and the wider world (Stilwell, 2016). This absence of social ties and connection may result in solitude and seclusion, significantly impacting mental health and well-being (Philbin et al., 2019).

Mohammed (2019) asserts the significance of public libraries in upholding cultural norms and values. This underscores the essence of public libraries in collecting information sources that convey and document the rural communities' cultural heritage whom they serve. Hence, the absence of public libraries in rural areas has dire consequences on cultural preservation. In rural areas, community archives in public libraries play a vital role in preserving community memory and identity (Bertot et al., 2016). Matodzi (2018) contends that public libraries remain vital, especially in the digital age, particularly for rural residents who rely on these institutions to access information that aids in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage. However, rural areas' lack of public libraries undermines this objective, leaving a void in cultural preservation efforts. Access to internet networks and technology is vital in an increasingly digital world. Public libraries are critical in bridging the digital gap by providing free access to the internet, computers and digital literacy programs (Bertot et al., 2016). However, in rural areas where libraries are absent, residents may lack access to essential digital resources, exacerbating existing disparities in technology access and digital skills (Moonasamy & Naidoo, 2022). The absence of public libraries in rural areas significantly contributes to the digital divide. Public libraries provide access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), offer ICT literacy and information literacy training, and facilitate and promote communication and information exchange between citizens and the government (Mphidi, 2016). Sheik (2017) elucidates the multifaceted nature of this gap,

manifesting as internal disparities where certain individuals possess digital empowerment while others remain digitally underserved. Initiatives to bridge the digital divide encounter obstacles because of insufficient support and the high costs associated with implementing ICT infrastructure in rural communities (Rowse et al., 2017). Telecommunications providers are reluctant to extend services to rural areas, citing challenges such as geographical barriers in mountainous regions that lack a viable customer revenue base to justify investment (Matodzi, 2018).

Implications of the Absence of Public Libraries in Rural Areas in South Africa

For sustained rural development, residents of rural areas want quick, accurate, relevant, and trustworthy information (Mohammed & Garaba, 2019). However, the community of the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga is struggling to get credible and accredited information due to the absence of a public library. They need to travel to other neighbouring places to access information from a public library which involves cost and that is a challenge to them as most are unemployed. The other challenge that is faced by the community is the lack of access to the internet and WI-FI (wireless fidelity). Learners are disadvantaged because they are unable to participate in school programs such as literacy programs, online tutoring programs, technological research programs, book club competitions and creativity programs. A high level of increase in technology, a high rate of unemployment and a lack of access to information seem to be a shift in the information needs of the community. The respondents maintain that load shedding brought a lot of change as they depend on their mobile phones to access information therefore if there is no electricity signal towers are affected. A literacy campaign in many developing nations is insufficient and will fail if it does not have the support of a strong public library service to continue when the school system ends (Okojie & Okiy, 2020). A lack of a public library in the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga negatively affects the community in that it hinders access and educational development of learners and students and discourages lifetime learning in the community. The lack of public libraries causes the community to miss out on skill development programmes, and promotes a high rate of unemployment and high rate of crime in the community. Lack of information access is one of the obstacles, it seems like an obligation to community members to rely on alternative methods to seek and access information. These methods include word of mouth from local leaders, community meetings, radio broadcasts, mobile phone networks, travelling to neighbouring areas to access public libraries and those who can afford access to internet café.

Hughes and Boss (2020) argued that geological factors can create more physical isolation between towns because they are frequently separated by great distances. Frequently, libraries are the only places with meeting rooms, fast public internet, and staff who know how to use the information resources. The lack of a public library in the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga hurts cultural and social life, participants indicated that the lack of a library makes it harder for people to engage in the community and hinders the community from experiencing cultural enrichment, which results in people feeling alone and disconnected from each other. There are no efforts made to address the issue of the lack of a public library in the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga. Public libraries cultivate a lifelong love of reading, promote literacy, improve people's creativity and imagination, promote access to information and resources, both physical and digital, close the knowledge gap and promote knowledge transfer they also afford all people regardless of age and status. This coincides with the study of Otolu (2022) which indicated that establishing public libraries in rural areas can bridge the gap in access to information and educational resources while contributing to the economic development of the communities.

The absence of public libraries in rural areas poses significant challenges. It has far-reaching impacts on the residents and the overall development of these regions, particularly in terms of social, educational, and economic aspects. These impacts are isolated incidents and have far-reaching consequences that can affect generations. This notion reveals that funding, infrastructure limitations, bureaucratic challenges, and political differences are the barriers to implementing a public library in rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga. Financial barriers affecting the implementation of a public library show that the government do not allocate a budget for the library project in rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga. The participants think that those in power do not influence budget allocation and the implementation of the public library in the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga is not considered a priority. There is not much of an infrastructural limit that pauses a challenge to build a library specifically regarding the land as participants believe there is so much empty area that the government can provide.

A lack of clear policies and procedures for the establishment and operation of a public library affects the implementation of the public library. It seems that lack of clarity on the roles and responsibilities, lack of a long-term plan, administrative inefficiencies, and red tape from different stakeholders add to the challenges of the implementation. Any discussion of issues influencing how a public sector organization operates would be lacking if the impact of politics was not considered. Politics greatly influences how projects are carried out (Sebata, 2025). Lengthy approval processes for project proposals and inadequate coordination between different government departments hinder the process of implementation of a public library. There are political and policy-related challenges which are significant barriers to establishing a public library in the rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga. The changes in local government priorities, lack of political will, and insufficient policy frameworks supporting library development in rural areas are barriers to the implementation of public libraries. Political instability in leadership encourages the disruption of ongoing projects and results in inconsistent support for library initiatives. Communities are in a view that existing policies do not adequately address the specific needs of rural areas, leading to a gap between policy intentions and practical implementation.

Conclusion

The limitations of this study include the potential lack of generalisability beyond rural areas surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga due to its specific context and characteristics. The sample size and representativeness of participants may limit the degree to which the findings apply to the entire community. The data collection methods, such as focus groups and interviews, are subject to biases and may not fully capture the complexity of information needs and barriers. In rural areas, the absence of a public library severely impairs information access and community development, escalating educational disparities and restricting professional and personal development chances. Residents could find it difficult to obtain vital information for academic, career, or personal enrichment reasons if there is not a designated area for learning and resources. This disparity may result in less political engagement, poorer literacy rates, and a lack of knowledge about significant social issues. The lack of a public library denies the neighbourhood a focal point for social and cultural events that can strengthen bonds between neighbours and encourage a feeling of community. In the end, the absence of a library in rural areas not only limits the potential of each individual but also impedes the community's overall development.

In light of the research findings, it is advised that the villages surrounding Kwa-Mhlanga form a community group to promote the establishment of a public library or library services, as this will raise awareness and show community interest in library resources; local communities should collaborate with local schools to improve library resources and promote community use after school hours; villages should collaborate with local organizations to create a mobile library that transports books and resources to various community locations; villages should set up a specific area in a community centre, school, or local business where residents can obtain books and other reading materials; and, finally, organize a book switch or exchange where community members can donate and share books. There is a significant need for a public library in rural areas, as the lack of access to information, education and related support materials adversely affects the community's education, social, cultural and economic lives. External factors, such as policy changes or community dynamics, may affect the implementation of a public library. Recognising these limitations is critical for accurately evaluating the study's findings within the context of the specific scope of the study and informing and encouraging future research endeavours in related areas. Based on the provision of public libraries in rural areas the researchers suggest that the field of provision of public libraries in rural areas can be investigated. Future studies can focus on the role of public libraries in promoting digital literacy in rural communities, the impact of rural libraries on community engagement and development and assessing the information needs of rural populations and the role of libraries.

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