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Original Article

### Children and Libraries: Innovative Library services at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library during the Covid-19 pandemic, Uganda

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Community libraries do not receive financial support from the government, unlike public and academic libraries in Uganda. This study explored the provision of library services during the COVID-19 period by Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library. The study investigated library services provided by the library, challenges encountered, and strategies that were used to address the challenges faced during the pandemic. A qualitative case study research design was used. Data was collected using face-to-face in-depth interviews and observation methods with library staff and patrons. Standard Operating Procedures were followed during the pandemic by both the participants and researchers to mitigate the risk of the deadly COVID-19 virus. Key findings revealed that the library adapted innovative ways to provide library services to children and the community during the COVID-19 pandemic amidst many challenges. The study recommends training of library staff in information management and more material and financial support by donors, the government, and all well-wishers to support the good work being done by Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library in Uganda.

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**INTRODUCTION**

In late December 2019, COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan City, China. COVID-19 spread rapidly across the world in multiple countries and was declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, by the WHO (Harris, 2021; Mahase, 2020; Olum, et al, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic created an environment where disengagement was critical in order to prevent infections; it led to the closing down of economies; restricted movement and solitary social life leading to seclusion from public engagements so as to control the spreading of the infectious COVID-19 (Nawaz, Gomes & Saldeen, 2020; Ćirić & Ćirić, 2021).

Several strategies were established worldwide to reduce COVID-19 infections and transmissions and one of the extreme ones was total lockdown and closure of the economy. In addition, measures like behavioural change for example, social distancing and regular washing of hands, were adopted in order to control the spread of the virus (Olum, et al, 2020).

The President of Uganda; Yoweri Museveni, in a televised address on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2021 reinstated some of the lockdown measures because of the high infection rates and death. This was due to an increase in the spread of the virus with an estimated 92,795 cumulative confirmed infected cases and 2,590 deaths (Ministry of Health, 2021; Xinhua, 2021).

This lockdown had diverse effects on different sectors of the country including education, agriculture, transport, business and health. Library

services across the world also changed; traditional approaches like physical access to information resources had to be stopped, and new approaches were adopted in delivering library services (McMenemy, Robinson & Ruthven, 2023). The circulation of print collections reduced and digital collections were widely adopted (Nawaz, Gomes & Saldeen, 2020; Ashiq, Jabeen & Mahmood, 2022). For most academic and public libraries, in-person training sessions were suspended and presented online and alternative services like home deliveries were adopted (Ćirić & Ćirić, 2021; McMenemy, Robinson & Ruthven, 2023).

A survey conducted on 3850 libraries worldwide by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) between May 12<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> 2021 (IFLA, 2020), revealed that libraries were providing alternative options for access to resources of the library which included the provision of services on the appointment, home delivery, and curbside services. Some libraries had to close and those that reopened had their operations and organization of work changed according to the lockdown restrictions (Harris, 2021; Dobрева & Anghelescu, 2022).

Tammaro (2020) notes that in Italy, librarians focused on bringing the library to the homes of the communities. They extended the loan period; online registration was promoted and more efforts were put into document delivery services for inter-library loans. Online content and the use of online tools were promoted during this period (Arnetoli, 2020; D’Asta et al., 2020; Ashiq, Jabeen & Mahmood, 2022). Tammaro (2020) adds that the COVID-19 experience was a turning point for many libraries that learnt to promote the user-centred approach in

the provision of library services and reach out to their communities in a more engaging manner.

Library services in Uganda were also affected by COVID-19. Uganda is a developing country in Eastern Africa and is ranked among the 10 countries with high fertility rates in the world. Uganda's population growth is estimated at 3.3% annually; the total population is estimated at 45,9 people with the urban areas registering an annual growth rate of 5.39% (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The literacy rates are estimated at 81% (World Bank, 2020). Libraries contribute to the literacy of nations and communities through the provision of quality information for development (Merga, 2020; IFLA, 2024).

Uganda has over 137 community libraries situated in different parts of the country (UgCLA annual report, 2020). Most community libraries in Africa are organized and managed by local organizations such as churches, schools, community groups, or individuals and have very close ties to the community (Sturges, 1994; UgCLA annual report, 2020). These libraries are not funded by the government but rely on donations and well-wishers to operate.

A community library is a library that is not part of an area's statutory library provision and is not managed or fully funded by a local or national government authority (IFLA Library Map of the World, 2024). Community libraries contribute not only to the literacy of the users but also lead to good governance, social progress and development of the community (Mia, 2020). Community libraries, compared to public libraries are a much newer concept in Uganda and are hardly 20 years old (UgCLA Annual Report, 2020).

Unlike public libraries that are established and developed in urban areas according to the Western model; community libraries on the other hand are a result of communities in rural areas realizing that

their development is dependent on having an information centre facility that is accessible and can facilitate them to access quality information and skills (FAVL, 2024; Mia, 2020).

The common services offered by community libraries include; collecting, organizing, and storing reading materials for all categories of users namely; children, pupils and adults and providing supplementary reading materials and prescribed textbooks for the youth who are out of school and those in school and other community-related information (National Library of Uganda, 2010; Mia, 2020).

### **Problem Statement**

The interaction between library staff and their users changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ali & Gatiti, 2020). A lot of adjustments had to be made in different areas by libraries around the world (IFLA, 2020). Consequently, libraries had to adjust and find innovative ways to deliver services and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nawaz, Gomes & Saldeen, 2020; McMenemy, Robinson & Ruthven, 2023). Studies indicate that different libraries had to customise library services according to their user information needs in order to ensure that relevant services are provided during the pandemic period (Connel, Wallis & Comeaux, 2021; Martzoukou, 2021; Kaba, 2021). Several studies reported on library operations among academic and public libraries in the USA (Risley, 2020; Mehta & Wang, 2020; Alajmi & Albudaiwi, 2020), United Kingdom (McMenemy, Robinson & Ruthven, 2022) in China (Guo et al., 2020), and academic libraries and public libraries in Uganda (Nalumaga & Byamugisha, 2022; Nalumaga et al., 2022). However, there was limited documentation on how community libraries operated during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in Uganda. This study intended to provide perspectives on how COVID-19 changed the pattern of community libraries in Uganda during the COVID-19

pandemic, with specific reference to Marko Lukooya Community Library in Mukono District.

### Study Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of library staff and users in relation to the provision of information services during the COVID-19 pandemic period at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library.

### Specific Objectives

The objectives of the study included to:

- Explore the provision of library services at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Describe the challenges faced in the provision of services at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Suggest strategies to ensure the effective provision of community library services at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library in case of another epidemic.

### Scope of the Study

The study was conducted at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library which is situated in Mukono, Central Uganda. This community library was selected because it is one of the libraries that remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is located in Mukono, District, 33 kilometres from the city centre, Kampala. The content scope entailed library services provided at the community library, how the library services were provided during the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges faced by library staff, and strategies to improve the provision of library services in case of another pandemic. This study captures the COVID-19 situation and the provision of library services in the early days when

the epidemic was reported in Uganda between December 2019 and February 2020.

## METHODOLOGY

### Description of the Study Area

Established in 2014, Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library was named after the great-grandfather of the director and founder of the library, Rogers Serunjogi. It is located 2kms off Kisoga- Nkokonjeru Road, in Mukono District, 33 km east of Kampala Capital City. The library contributes to the education of all people in the community and an estimated of over 1000 books are borrowed from this library by children, youths, adults, and nearby schools (Marko Lukooya Community Library, 2021). The library is currently a member of the Uganda Community Library Association (UgCLA) with the staff comprising of two library staff and one Director. Library resources include; books, braille books, and four computers. The library is open from Monday to Sunday and it remained open at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. On Sunday evenings, the library holds reading clubs. The key services provided by this library are reading activities, music dance and drama, and support of agricultural activities and outreach programs (Marko Lukooya Library, 2021).

To provide these services, the library is involved in different collaborations and workings with several partnerships, both within the community, the country and externally. Some of these include the Uganda Community Libraries Association (UgCLA), Book Aid International which provides books to the library through the support of UgCLA; Enjuba Spelling Bee children's education organization focusing on teacher training, publishing of locally and culturally relevant children's books and setting up libraries in schools (Enjuba Spelling bee Uganda, 2021) and the African Library Project which is a project that partners with libraries across the world by donating information resources (African Library Project, 2021).

MLMCL remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic and below are some of the services they provided: the library provided basic library services that include lending of information resources to teachers who visited the library to select storybooks for their students. In addition, library patrons were also allowed to read from the library which was open from Monday to Sunday. The library also conducted reading clubs among users of different age groups and they included three groups aged 3-6 years, 7- 12 years old, and 13-18 years old. Indoor games were provided as recreational activities for young people namely; Draft, Chess, Ludo and writing and drawing activities and toys for the younger users.

### Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study research design. The design enabled the researchers to study the provision of library services at the community library and to document in-depth experiences of the staff and library patrons using interactive approaches and multiple data collection methods (Cronin, 2024; Yin, 2009). The research design also facilitated cross-validation of the data collected from multiple data sources for quality results (Cronin, 2024; Yin, 2009).

### Study Population

The study population consisted of a total of sixteen participants. This included; the Director of the community library, two library staff and thirteen library users. These were the only participants that were accessed in the library during the COVID-19 period.

### Sampling Techniques

Both purposive and convenience sampling strategies were used in recruiting the participants in the study. All library staff participated in the study because they were involved in the provision of library services. The Director was also interviewed as the

manager of the community library. Convenience sampling was used to assess all library patrons who were accessible in the library during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data was collected using in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted with library staff and library patrons. This method enabled the researchers to interact with the participants and capture their views (Irvine, et al, 2013) on the impact of COVID-19 on the provision of library services, the ways the services were provided during the pandemic, and the challenges faced in a more interactive manner. Another data collection method used was the observation method. The method was effective for observing the library staff, the innovative ways they used to provide library services, and the constraints they faced during the COVID-19 period. The method also enabled the researchers to observe how the patrons utilized library services and the challenges they faced. In addition, secondary sources found in the library, for example, annual reports, journals, and web resources found on the website of the community library were reviewed to enrich the study.

The researchers and participants observed SOPs by sanitizing their hands frequently, wearing masks throughout the interviews and observing social distance. This was essential in safeguarding both participants and researchers from COVID-19 infections.

The key informant interview guide and observation checklist were used to collect relevant data on the provision and use of library services, and challenges experienced by the staff and patrons during the pandemic.

### Research Ethics

This study adhered to research ethics where only those participants who consented were recruited in



the study. The children who were found in the library were given letters explaining the research and seeking assent from their parents as minors to be allowed to participate in the study. Only those who came with a signed authorization from their parents the following day participated in this study. The participants were treated with respect and their confidentiality was observed. The principle of reflexivity was observed in the research process to ensure the credibility of results by minimizing personal biases and representing the views of the participants.

## FINDINGS

During the interviews, Standard Operating Procedures of social distancing, involving hand washing, sanitizing the seats and wearing masks were followed by the researchers and participants to reduce the risks of contracting COVID-19. The patrons were categorized into two cohorts before the interview: patrons attending primary education (3 to 6 years) and those in secondary school (13 to 17 years). Each of the cohort was interviewed separately. The demographic characteristics of library staff are described in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Library Staff**

Variable	Age distribution	Frequency
Age	31- 44	3
Gender	Male	2
	Female	1
Level of Education	Diploma in Journalism	1
	Diploma in Information Technology Business and project planning	1
	Certificate in Information Technology	1

The study consisted of a total of 16 participants. A total of thirteen children and three library staff participated in the study. The study had three members of staff who were aged between 35-41 years, with one female and two males. One of the library staff had a certificate in Information

Technology, two had Diplomas, specializing in Journalism and a Diploma in Information Technology Business and project planning. None of the staff were professional librarians.

Table 2 presents demographic information about library patrons.

**Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Library Patrons**

Variable	Age distribution(years)	Frequency
Age	3 -6 years	8
	13-15 years	2
	16 - 17 years	3
Total		13
Gender	Male	8
	Female	5
Total		13
Level of Education	Lower primary school	8
	Secondary school	5

The library users (children) were aged between 3 to 17 years. The majority of the participants were children aged 3 to 6 years (8), followed by those aged 16 to 17 years (3) and the least number of participants were aged 13 to 15 years (2). By gender, eight (8) patrons were males and five (5), females. All the participants interviewed were school-going; some attended lower primary school (8) and others secondary school (5).

### **Services Provided by Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The following services were provided by the library during the COVID-19 epidemic;

#### ***Community Reading Award***

The library was able to provide resources in the form of books to different communities within the area. In September 2021, the MLMCL was awarded a grant of £1,400 from Book Aid International, as part of a grant to 14 partner organizations across Africa so that they can deliver micro-projects as part of their new *Community Reading Award*.

Various schools namely Buyinga Sunrise Schools, St. Kizito Bbanda, Jesus Alive Education Center, Goshen Primary Schools, Sir Apollo Kagawa, Salama School for the Blind and Elem Secondary School received funds for this support.

#### ***The Community Mobile Mountain Bike Libraries project***

The library provided mobile library services to various communities during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The library recruited five local youths to become Mobile Mountain Bike Librarians as part of the *Community Mobile Mountain Bike Libraries* project aimed at reaching out to the communities. These bicycles were used to transport books from the community library to children in the community.

#### ***Lending Services***

During the pandemic, the library was open from Monday to Sunday. However, the number of library patrons allowed in the library was restricted. Only a maximum of ten (10) children were allowed to visit the library for reading. This was done to reduce congestion in the library given that overcrowding was a risk factor to the spread of COVID-19. During weekdays, the library staff also reached out to the communities by going to the patrons' homes to lend out books and teach farming. Library staff agreed that this initiative attracted more patrons to the library.

One of the participants revealed that:

*The library staff delivered books using boda-boda (motorcycle) to the children's homes. When the neighbours saw this initiative by the library, they requested to know how they would borrow books and also to visit the library. The number of users increased. The children nearby the library came and borrowed books from the library (Library staff P1, Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library, 2020)*

#### ***Storytelling sessions for young children***

The library was also involved in story reading and writing activities. Library staff revealed that they received support from Ms. Lisa Foo, a friend of the library from the USA who paid for a license for the Zoom App. Her children read stories to children (3-6 years) at the library using the Zoom platform where the children accessed the reading sessions from the Director's laptop. Ms. Foo also provided the data and bought solar panels for the library. This was able to support the Zoom sessions without interruption.

One of the children explained that stories were read to them via Zoom by Foo's children but they were hard to understand because of the American accent that they did not perceive. The librarian assisted the

children to understand the stories by translating them to Luganda as the Zoom reading sessions were being conducted. This made the young children enjoy the storytelling sessions in the library.

The Ugandan children too shared their stories in their local language (Luganda) and these were translated into English by the librarian. The children indicated that they enjoyed the reading sessions and were excited to see fellow children interacting with them via the Zoom Platform.

One of the children said that:

*In Zoom class, the librarian tells us what our young friends are saying in Luganda...uhhhmm and explains to them in English. We cannot understand their English hmmm, it is hard not like ours but the librarian made us enjoy and talk to our friends by telling us what they were saying in Luganda. The stories were good so good. (Female patron, aged 6, Marko lukooya Library, 2020).*

Another child emphasized that:

*It was not only those children who shared their stories. We also told them about our homes in Uganda, what we eat hmmm COVID and the games we like. It was good because we saw each other on Zoom. (Male Patron, aged 5, Marko Lukooya Library, 2020)*

### ***Services for the Visually Impaired Children***

The library staff also revealed that their library provided information services to support people with special needs during the COVID-19 period. Their sponsor, Ms. Lisa Foo raised funds to buy 30 MP3s for the visually impaired learners of Primary Seven (P.7), Senior Four (S.4) and Senior Six (S.6). This enabled these learners to listen to audio notes and read Braille books during this pandemic period.

### ***Street business school***

The library also collaborated with Read for Life, a Non-Governmental Organisation to support families in the community to gain financial literacy skills to start businesses. The communities were engaged in a six-month coaching program, designed and managed by Read for Life, that educates and empowers women to get out of their comfort zone, market their businesses, find capital, start record keeping, understand their customer base, and general financial management, which left the women in the community with confidence about income generating activities hence working together with them to support their families. Fifty men and women benefited from the project.

### ***Resource mobilization***

Ms. Lisa Foo also donated books, toys, pens, crayons, four laptops and solar panels to the Library. In addition, she also donated disposable and cloth masks for the learners. In 2020, the children performed an online annual charity fundraising concert where the stage was set in one of the schools, and the shooting was conducted online via Facebook and YouTube. The show was viewed by friends of music for life and those who love music. As a result, the library received the donations earlier highlighted.

### ***Outreach (Partnerships)***

The library staff worked with the health workers of Health Center III Nakisunga Sub-county to provide library books, flyers and brochures about the COVID-19 pandemic while observing the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The library staff also played a key role in the COVID-19 pandemic by serving as front-line staff to educate the communities on the causes of COVID-19 and how to prevent it. This outreach activity enabled them to maintain contact with library patrons especially people with special needs. The study also revealed that about 30-40 storybooks in the English language



were borrowed by nearby schools for two weeks. They added that outreach services were new and innovative ways to meet user needs during lockdown.

### ***Support for Agriculture***

One of the staff revealed that agriculture was one of the sectors that was not locked down, and because the library is located in a rural area and most of the community relies on agriculture, this activity continued. Apart from reading and writing, the library staff trained the children and youths at their homes on farming. The children created their own small home gardens for learning and grew vegetables and were able to cultivate an interest towards farming. One of the participants indicated that about 200 families in the community were farmers and farming was their main means of livelihood. With such support, the young people learnt farming, so they valued the land as they practised farming.

One of the students in the library interviewed regarding support provided by library staff on farming confirmed that:

*This library has supported our community, they work with other people and have helped us learn how to grow green vegetables. In this COVID season, I sell my greens and earn money. Library patron, aged 16, Marko Lukooya Library, 2020)*

### ***Music, dance, and drama***

The library embraced cultural and modern music, which allowed the youths and children to be exposed to world-class technological music trends. Emphasis was put on the composition of inspirational music, unity freedom, peace, climate, and environmental protection. The children who were interested in music were trained in drumming, singing, keyboard, and brass band. This was another innovative library service provided by the library during the pandemic.

Music and drama activities were conducted under a tree shade in the library compound.

### **Challenges Faced by Library Staff and Patrons in Accessing and Provision of Library Services at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library during the COVID-19 Period**

#### ***Limited Access to the Library by Patrons***

Library staff revealed that during the COVID-19 period, the library services were affected in many ways. They indicated that the delivery of library services, especially the school-going children, was affected because the library permitted fewer numbers of children in the library to enforce S.O.Ps. This resulted in few children accessing library services at that time. One of the library staff said:

*“This library usually has many users on normal days because we have many activities. We provide reading space and facilities, textbooks on different subjects, storytelling sessions, music and drama. The small number of users is because of the lockdown. We are implementing S.O.P.s to reduce the spread of COVID-19” (Library staff, 2020).*

When the patrons were interviewed regarding the challenges they faced during the pandemic they confirmed that a few library users were allowed in the library by staff due to the pandemic. They also indicated that the provision of library services had changed. One of the children emphasized that:

*“Many of the children are waiting for us to finish reading for them to come in the library. The librarian allows a few children in the morning and evening to prevent COVID-19. This disease can catch you if you are many sitting together.” (Library patron, aged 17, Marko Lukooya, Library)*

### ***Limited Funding for Library Services and Operations***

The library staff emphasized that the library had limited funds to facilitate the staff to carry out library outreach services such as mobile library services, support for agriculture services and outreach to the community. They added that the library also failed to get funds to acquire enough protective gear and materials such as gloves, sanitisers, masks and soap that were essential for protecting them and the patrons against the spread of the virus. One of the staff members said that:

*“You can see for yourselves. We are still struggling to acquire more gloves, sanitisers and masks in this risky season of COVID-19. We are mostly emphasizing social distancing and washing with soap. We have a few sanitisers because they are expensive, and we cannot afford them” (Library staff, 2020).*

### ***Limited Reading Materials***

There were limited numbers of information resources in the library especially textbooks to support school-going children, more so those that were in candidate classes (Primary 7, Senior 4 and Senior 6). While the library received some donations of reading materials from Book Aid International (BAI), all the reading materials were in the English language yet children in lower classes (Primary one to Primary three) in Uganda are under the thematic curriculum which requires the learners to study in their mother tongue. Information materials in the Luganda language were not available in the library and this affected children in this category.

A library staff said that:

*“While we have received donations of books from Book Aid International. The books are in English language and this is a big challenge to the children especially those in the lower primary who study in the local language. We*

*would have served our people better if we had books for the children translated into their mother tongue.” (Library staff, Marko Lukooya Library, 2020).*

### **A library patron added that:**

*“Our library is good but we do not have all the textbooks that are used at school. When I ask for some textbooks, pamphlets, even an atlas and question bank hmmm they say it is not there. I am in primary seven preparing for my examinations, this makes me worried because even at school we don’t have these materials.” (Library patron, aged 17, Marko Lukooya Library, 2020).*

### ***Limited Furniture, Space and Computers***

Library staff interviewed also emphasized that they had limited furniture in the form of chairs, reading tables and bookshelves to accommodate the many numbers of patrons that required library services at that time. They added that this challenge made it hard for them to accommodate the users and maintain the required social distance as stipulated by the Ministry of Health guidelines in Uganda.

They also had only one laptop computer that belonged to the Director and this was used for Zoom storytelling sessions. A limited number of children were allowed to come to the library to attend the storytelling sessions with the children in the USA via Zoom due to social distancing. Also due to the limited number of computers, the children could not access electronic information resources that were readily available via the internet.

Regarding limited furniture and computers, there was general agreement among all the children interviewed in the library that limited furniture and the absence of computers in the library affected their reading. One of the patrons said that:

*“Children from rich families are studying even in lockdown via Zoom. My friends studying at good schools tell me they are studying but us here we cannot because we don’t have computers. UNEB will not have mercy on us poor children. We are going to do the same exams.” (A patron aged 16, Marko Lukooya Library).*

Another child added that:

*“The library has few benches and chairs. We are many and cannot fit and COVID requires us not to squeeze ourselves in the chairs. Few children can be allowed in the library.” (Female library patron aged 13, Marko Lukooya Library).*

### **Strategies for Effective Provision of Community Library Services in Case of Another Pandemic**

This section presents the strategies that the participants proposed to address the challenges they faced in the library during the COVID-19 pandemic and methods that can be used to manage library services in case of a future pandemic.

#### ***Acquisition of a Braille Machine***

In order to provide inclusive library services to all library patrons, the library staff indicated that they needed braille machines to cater for the visually impaired children in the library. This they argued would enable them to easily access and use information materials in the library.

One of the librarians said:

*“You know it is not the end. Another strange disease can come up any time in future, but if we have many braille machines, we can continue to provide information to our users who are visually impaired” (Librarian Marko Lukooya, 2020)*

#### ***Establishment of a Computer Laboratory***

The library staff also implored support from the government, donor community as well as well-wishers to support the library in expanding and integrating ICTs and the internet into its library services. This they agreed would improve information literacy skills and access to electronic information resources among the library users remotely in case of a future pandemic. A library staff emphasised that:

*This is a community library without any support from the government. But you can see the big contribution we are making in the lives of children and community members. This is a poor community where some parents cannot afford electricity at night or textbooks. They come to get this opportunity from this library. We serve many villages...hmmm if we got support from the government in the form of computers and other accessories, this would make a big contribution. We would teach the community how to use the computer and the internet and make this community better. (Library staff, Mark Lukooya Library, 2020).*

Another participant added that:

*“The library will be more interesting when they acquire computers to study on Zoom, get new friends on Facebook and the librarian will teach us how to use the computer.” (Female patron, aged 16, Marko Lukooya Library 2020)*

#### ***Increase Provision of Outreach Services***

The participants indicated that since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of users in the library increased. However, due to limited funds, they were unable to effectively reach out to the communities that were in remote areas of Mukono District. They said that their outreach services entailed walking to nearby communities and lending out reading materials, using bicycles and motorbikes (boda-

boda) for users who stay far from the community library.

They noted that the library had only two bicycles that were donated and these were used to provide mobile library services. Library staff further emphasized that there was a need to recruit more librarians to serve as mobile librarians in order to ensure that many more homes can access books, using mountain bikes and backpacks. They suggested that during the school days, the volunteers could reach the schools that wish to have these services. The six villages they proposed would get these services include; Bbanda Bugeneraddala, Bbanda Natula, Bbanda Sunga, Bbanda Kyandzi and Buzu. They also indicated that villages including; Kisoga Town Council, Nakisunga and Kiyoola would be added to the list of beneficiaries because they noted in their library statistics that many children who visit the library come from these villages that are far away from the library. All library staff interviewed agreed that community outreach services were a good strategy that they would maintain after the pandemic because the community appreciated their services and understood the role of libraries in contributing to the education of their children.

One of the library staff said:

*Let anyone provide more bicycles even a van and see how we will distribute the books to the communities. We only had two bicycles but we did wonders and our community members are so grateful. (Library staff, Mark Lukooya Library, 2020)*

### **Government Support**

One of the participants urged the government to support community library services in the country by ensuring that every village has a library so as to contribute to quality education. It was emphasized that their library is unable to reach the many clients in the community who require library services.

### **Training**

The library staff also revealed that they needed to train mobile library volunteers in record keeping, customer care, conducting user needs assessment, and how to handle the beneficiaries. They emphasized that this knowledge and skills would improve access and use of quality information materials as well as service provision in the community library.

A library staff said that:

*We are quite understaffed and because of this, it is hard to reach out to all our clients. There is a saying that two heads are better than one. We are only three staff running this library and also going to the community. We need to get volunteers and train them to support us. (Library staff, Marko Lukooya Library, 2020)*

### **Sustainable Income for the Library**

The participants emphasized that it was necessary for the library to come up with various strategies to keep the library running since it was not funded by the state. They suggested they had many tourist attractions in the neighbourhood that could be used to attract tourists and revenue to the library. They suggested that their bicycles can also be used by tourists for community tourism. They suggested that tourists hire and ride bikes to visit Ssezibwa Falls and Lake Victoria, sunset viewing, and trek in the bush Baby forest to enable the library to mobilize funds for the library.

A library staff said that;

*We are in a very beautiful place surrounded by waterfalls. Tourists are welcome both national and international and our bicycles are good.....hmmm can be used for trekking in the bush. This is one of the avenues our library can benefit from. Come and see Ssezibwa Falls. (Library staff, Marko Lukooya Library, 2020).*



Another library staff emphasised the need for the government and well-wishers to support the library because it is making a big contribution towards literacy in the community.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### Provision of Library Services at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Findings indicate that the COVID-19 epidemic affected the pattern for the provision of library services at MLMCL. The same happened to libraries worldwide during the pandemic; it forced libraries to shift their focus from traditional methods of providing information resources and affected library facilities, users, staff and the information-seeking behaviour of library users (Dube & Jacobs, 2023; Ashiq, Jabeen & Mahmood, 2022). Services provided in MLMCL library during the COVID-19 pandemic included; mobile library services, economic empowerment for women, reading and writing services, music dance and drama and support for agricultural farming. The findings also concur with various studies (Ashiq, Jabeen & Mahmood, 2021; Garner et al., 2021; Smith, 2020; Harris, 2021; McMenemy, Robinson & Ruthven, 2023) that revealed that during the pandemic, libraries offered remote services like home delivery and field visits, curbside pickup and mobile services.

Mobile library services at MLMCL were provided through the Community Mobile Mountain Bike Libraries project in which the library recruited five local youths as Mobile Mountain Bike librarians for community outreach; home visits to communities and conducting training in agriculture and farming. In addition, the library was involved in supporting reading and writing activities and in the provision of library services to visually impaired children for example purchase of MP3s for the visually impaired learners (candidates) of P7, S4 and S6 children since schools were closed and the learners could not

access Braille for their notes. The finding agrees with, Ashiq, Jabeen and Mahmood (2022) who noted that libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic had to increase accessibility and outreach services to expand the library services beyond the walls of the library in order to reach a maximum number of users.

Other services included economic empowerment through a coaching programme called Street Business School, which economically empowers women; music, dance and drama, donation of scholastic materials and partnerships for health awareness and outreach. Similarly, the literature also reveals that libraries worldwide also extended partnerships during the COVID-19 times. Peachy (2020) notes that some librarians in the UK were able to extend their partnerships with external organizations during the COVID-19 lockdown.

This enabled them to maintain contact with vulnerable groups of library users and find new ways to meet their needs during lockdown. For example, a library in Scotland through a partnership with the Red Cross delivered library books via the hot meals delivery service which the Red Cross was providing for vulnerable older people (Peachy, 2020). Libraries also provided important social services for example telephone assistance, printing services, working with council departments and organizations to provide health services and information and food provision (Ameh, Ukwouma & Oye (2021); McMenemy, Robinson & Ruthven 2023).

The Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library also provided support for agriculture, by offering training to children and youth at their homes. The staff guided the children to create their own small home gardens for learning and growing vegetables and growing interest towards farming. Relatedly, Alajmi and Albudaiwi (2020) posit that during the pandemic, libraries provided information and help on healthcare and wellness, career and business



support, encouraging civic engagement and support for food security, thus depicting the library as a disaster response resource for effective emergency management in communities.

Findings reveal that the Marko Lukooya Community Library, provided all the above services while observing the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) as stipulated by the Uganda Ministry of Health. This library put in place measures to ensure and avoid the spread of the pandemic and these include limiting numbers in the library to ten (versus the normal seating capacity of 200), as per the IFLA guidelines on limiting numbers to the library (IFLA, 2021). The finding agrees with Dobrev and Anghelescu (2022) and Harris (2021) who noted that libraries had to redefine the services they provided and upon reopening had to rearrange their spaces, change in sanitation, and introduce safety measures.

The library also followed the hygiene guidelines as provided by the Uganda Ministry of Health, for example, provision for the washing of hands at entry, wearing masks, sanitizing and maintaining social distancing, as was recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022). This is also stated by Mehta and Wang (2020) who noted in their study that library staff maintained standard operating procedures while serving patrons and handling library collections. What is interesting about MLMCL is that these good and ingenious innovations that came with the COVID-19 Pandemic are still practised by the library to date.

### **Challenges Faced by Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library in the Provision of Library Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

From the findings, the challenges that the library faced while providing library services during the COVID-19 pandemic included; a lack of funds to facilitate the staff to carry out services like mobile library services, support for agriculture services and

outreach; limited reading materials especially in the local language (Luganda) since all the donations by Book Aid International were in English. This agrees with Ameh, Ukwouma and Oye (2021) and Tammaro (2020) who cited the absence of current materials, adequately trained personnel and limited funding for libraries as challenges faced by libraries during the pandemic.

Other challenges for this library included a lack of equipment and appropriate furniture like chairs, reading tables, bookshelves and computers. This is in line with Asimah, Dzogbede and Akaba (2021) who cited a similar situation in Ghana, they highlighted a lack of equipment and power outages as major challenges. Ashiq, Jabeen and Mahmood (2022) cited insufficient finances, inadequate infrastructure and a change in user information-seeking behaviour as challenges libraries faced during the pandemic times.

### **Findings on Strategies to Ensure Effective Provision of Community Library Services at Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library**

Some of the strategies that were suggested for improving the provision of library services during the COVID-19 pandemic included; training in Library and Information management, acquisition of a Braille machine for visually impaired children in the library in order to provide inclusive library services; establishment of a computer laboratory in the library to provide access to internet, electronic information resources and to boost information literacy training.

They also suggested more financial support to facilitate continuous outreach services to communities that were far away from the library and in great need of library services. They proposed that through recruitment of more volunteers to serve as Mobile librarians; lobbying for more government support and training of library staff especially mobile library volunteers in records keeping,

customer care and user needs assessment, the library would be sustained to serve the community. The finding is in line with various studies (Ashiq, Jabeen & Mahmood, 2022; Ameh, Ukwouma & Oye, 2021; Tsekea, & Chigwada, 2021) that highlighted that building the capacity of library professionals in digital literacy, developing infrastructure and systems for online presence and more equipment was essential for improving the provision of library services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ashiq, Jabeen & Mahmood, 2021; Asimah, Dzogbede & Akaba, 2021; Garner et al 2021; Alajmi & Albudaiwi, 2020; Ameh, Ukwouma & Oye, 2021; Tsekea & Chigwada, 2021).

It is important to note that while many libraries, especially in developed countries, resorted to ICT-enabled services and tools like websites, social media sites, email and other ICT-enabled services during the pandemic (Ashiq, Jabeen & Mahmood, 2022; Dube & Jacobs, 2023; Smith, 2020), Marko Lukooya Memorial Community Library was not able to adapt to use of ICTs and provision of online services due to lack of computer equipment, reliable internet and appropriate infrastructure. The library had only one laptop that was used to access Zoom story reading sessions for children accessed from the USA.

Contrary to the findings, studies emphasized the use of online services to ensure that users can continue receiving information even during a pandemic. Ashiq, Jabeen and Mahmood (2021) emphasized the creation of digital content and tools in libraries to meet the information needs of modern users. They observed that these tools help in providing up-to-date services and would be very useful tools in providing information to users.

Similar studies urged libraries to have strategic planning for the effective provision of library and information services during emergency situations (Ameh, Ukwouma & Oye, 2021). Ashiq, Jabeen and Mahmood (2021) suggested that policymakers

in information-based institutions should prioritize having disaster management plans and strategies that can adapt to emergency situations.

## CONCLUSION

Marko Lukooya Community Memorial Library provided information services in innovative and dedicated ways during the pandemic despite its limited funding and financial constraints. These services have continued to be provided even after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many challenges affected the provision of library services during the COVID-19 period, including; lack of funds to facilitate the staff to carry out outreach services, limited reading materials especially in the local language, lack of computers and accessories, limited furniture in the library, and limited library staff. Some of the strategies that were suggested for the effective provision of community library services during the COVID-19 pandemic included; the acquisition of a Braille machine for visually impaired children, establishment of a computer laboratory, access to internet and electronic information resources, information literacy training, increased financial support to the library and recruitment of more volunteers as well as the need to lobby for more government support and capacity building for staff.

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### Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare no conflict of interest.

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