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## Innovative Public Libraries in United Arab Emirates: Taking library services in public spaces

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## **Innovative Public Libraries in United Arab Emirates: Taking library services in public spaces**

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### **Abstract:**

*Public Libraries in the United Arab Emirates are recognized as repositories of human knowledge and heritage especially in today's knowledge-driven economy where knowledge and innovation are essential drivers of growth and prosperity. Public Libraries provide access to information which may*

*be used for self-development, cultural awareness and enhancement and continuing education. For children and young people they provide a positive alternative to pastime reading, researching and participating in activities organized by the library. United Arab Emirates is a union of seven emirates and public libraries in these emirates are affiliated to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development (MCYCD) and local entities. The National Library in Abu Dhabi also serves as a public library and has recently embarked on projects of establishing branch libraries in different locations in the emirate of Abu Dhabi. Most of the libraries have been established as joint ventures between government entities, each providing either space, personnel or funding.*

*In an effort to build a knowledge society in UAE, the MCYCD/TCA and Abu Dhabi Municipality have partnered and took a leap step to take library services to the people in areas where most people congregate including shopping malls, public parks and beach with the goal of providing access of information to the community. As the Minister of Culture stated during the inauguration of the public library at the beach “We want to create an environment where information is available to everybody at any given time and place. (The National April 10 2014). Public libraries in public spaces is not a new phenomenon in the West, it is however exciting and intriguing in the country and the region, where the majority of population are employed and have no time to visit libraries, hence such an innovative venture has been well received by the public who would have otherwise been shopping, laying at the beach, etc., such spaces allow residents to achieve multiple goals when they visit such public spaces.*

**Keywords:** United Arab Emirates, Public Libraries, Beach Libraries, Libraries in the Malls.

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## **Context**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) consist of seven emirates that formed a federation in 1971. Abu Dhabi is the capital and the largest emirate while Dubai is the commercial/business hub and the most well-known emirate due to tourism and real estate industries that have been very popular of recent making Dubai the destination of choice for many travellers and migrants (Kerr, 2008). Other emirates are Sharjah, Fujairah, Ajman, Ra’s al Khaimah and Umm al Quwain. A map of the UAE is illustrated below:

**Figure1: Map of the United Arab Emirates**



Source: Zayed University (2015). Living in the UAE. In *Zayed University Employment*. Retrieved from <http://www.zu.ac.ae/employment/html/liveuae.html>

The population of UAE is 8.2 million people (in 2013, Britannica online 2015), of these two thirds are migrants commonly referred to in the UAE as experts. These consist of workers and professionals who have been attracted by the lucrative tax free salaries of the country (Khaleej Times, 2013), but contribute heavily to the country's development through production in various forms and fields. Most professionals are in the fields of education, construction and oil and gas. The population of UAE consisting of workers is very young hence having young kids needing schooling. With this school libraries become a necessity to support children's education and learning. In addition some adults also engage in continuous education while others work and study to improve their skills and academic profiles hence getting better salaries. This group as well makes use of public libraries.

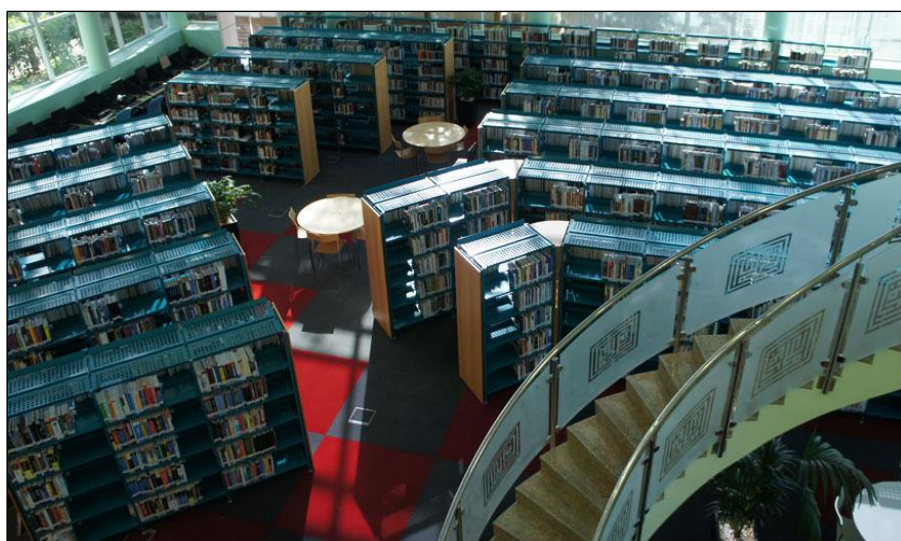
### **Background: Development of Public Libraries in UAE**

In UAE, the history of libraries and public libraries in particular is as young as the nation itself. The first library was established in 1963 when a library was built in Al-Ras area in Dubai. Later on, more branch libraries were opened in Dubai under the leadership of His

Highness Sheikh Maktoum Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Crown Prince of Dubai & Deputy Prime Minister at that time, and His Highness Sheikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Minister of Finance and Industry and President of Dubai Municipality in 1989 in Dubai busy city areas where most people congregated such as Deira and Bur Dubai. The new branches were opened at Hor Al Anz, Al Rashidiya, Umm Suqeim and Al Safa. In 1998 another public library was opened in Hatta a city bordering Oman. To meet needs of more communities more branches were added in Al Twar in 2007 and AlMankool in 2012 hence the development and expansion of Dubai Public Libraries to a total of eight public libraries by 2012. All libraries have a section for children. The Dubai Public Libraries were managed by the Dubai Municipality until 2008, when they were moved to the Dubai Arts and Culture Authority. This is a government entity that has been created to take the responsibility of enhancing and preserving the arts and cultural heritage scene in order for Dubai to be a shining vibrant city and as example for the Arab world in terms of arts and culture (<http://www.dubaiculture.gov.ae/>)

Membership to Dubai Public Library is open to UAE citizens and residents, and citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), i.e. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. A minimal fee of AED150 refundable is required for membership. Access to Internet and Wi-Fi is free. Access to electronic resources is now available on site for members and visitors, Members can also access from off-site through controlled logins. The e-resources collection includes e-books, manuscripts, government documents, databases and multimedia. The picture below is of the AlMankool Public Library, part of Dubai Public Library system.

**Figure 2: AlMankool Public Library**



Source: Joe Chua Agdeppa (n.d.). retrieved from <http://www.joeagdeppa.com/interior/> with permission.

**Figure 3: AlMankool Public Library outside view**



Source: Joe Chua Agdeppa (n.d.). retrieved from <http://www.joeagdeppa.com/interior/> with permission.

In Abu Dhabi, the National Library was established in 1981 (National Library 2015) as a result of the Amiri Law No 7 of 1981, it started as the Cultural Foundation, with the decree, it was designated the role of a national library charged with responsibility for collecting and

preserving intellectual heritage of the nation (UAE) and providing library services to the public (Hirsch 2012). Public services began 1984 and the children's library began operations in 1986, with the goal of developing reading habits and the love of books in children as a part of their growth and development (<https://www.abudhabi.ae/portal/>, 2014).

So far the National Library has a collection of over two million books, and six branches operating as public libraries and providing access to everyone. The development of public libraries in Abu Dhabi is more recent as the branches were opened very recently from 2011. Membership providing borrowing privileges is limited to UAE nationals and residents with UAE identification card. A refundable deposit of AED 400 (USD108) is required. Operating hours vary depending on location, however most are open 6 days a week between 9 am and 9 p.m. except for the main library, Al Nahyan which is open seven days a week from 8 am to 10 pm Sunday to Thursday, and on Friday from 5 pm to 8 pm while on Saturday it open from 10 am to 10 pm. All libraries have a children's section to cater for needs of the young ones. The Abu Dhabi Public Libraries are part of the National Library which is a sector in the Tourism and Culture Authority (TCA) formerly Abu Dhabi Authority of Culture and Heritage (ADACH). The branches include Mazyad Mall, Khalifa Park, Al Bahia Park, Alain Mall, in Al Ain region and Al Marfa in the Western region and Al Nahyan library (<https://www.abudhabi.ae/portal/>, 2014).

The libraries are open 6 days a week, except for the AlNahyan library which operates 7 days a week. Services and hours of operation at the Abu Dhabi Public libraries vary according to branch and needs of the local population i.e. patrons, but generally lending services, reference services, Internet and computers are available for public to use. WI-FI access is also provided for visitors who bring their own devices. Ample space is available for quiet studying, reading or browsing. Resources are mostly in Arabic and a limited number in English. The main library however has many titles in English as well as other languages.

### **Sharjah Public Library**

The Sharjah Public Library consist of a total of six libraries spread around the Sharjah Emirate, with the main library in Sharjah city and branches in Dibba AlHosn, Kalba, AlDhaid, Wadi Elhelow, and Kor Fakkan. These originated from the royal family library collection of Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr Al Qasimi which he established in 1925 and was passed down through three generations. While a royal collection it was housed in the court and was

known as Qasimi Library until when it was handed over to the Sharjah Municipality by the current ruler of Sharjah and Member of UAE Supreme Council, HH Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi. At the municipality it was renamed as the Sharjah Library. The Sharjah library has an interesting history, having started as a private collection, and moving locations five times. It was later moved to the Ministry of Information at the time when all Sharjah departments were incorporated in the UAE federal institutions. His Highness claimed back and placed it under the Sharjah Department of Culture & Information, ([http://www.shjlibrary.ae/en/?page\\_id=17](http://www.shjlibrary.ae/en/?page_id=17), 2015). In 2014, HH Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammad Al Qasimi issued an Emiri Decree No.15 for 2014 directing public libraries and the Sharjah International Book Fair under the Sharjah Book Authority (<http://sharjahba.ae/indexen.html>). In 2011, the Sharjah library moved to its permanent home at the city, Culture roundabout.

To join as a member a patron would pay AED 160 as a deposit for lifetime membership and can access both print and electronic resources at the library and from home. Sharjah library visitors and members enjoy access to electronic resources for both Arabic and English language documents. The databases include: MEDLINE for medical and health sciences research articles, E-Marefa, books in Arabic, Credo reference provides books in various subjects and topics while The Great Mosque has classic archive books from 1820 to 1914 about religion and Arab heritage. In addition the Sharjah Library has a collection and facilities for individuals who are visually impaired.

**Figure 4: Sharjah Public Library- Main Library**





### **Ministry of Culture, Youth and Development (MCYCD) Public Libraries**

The MCYCD has opened public libraries at the federal level in the Northern Emirates, Abu Dhabi and the Western region in the effort to promote intellectual and cultural awareness in UAE communities (<https://mcycd.gov.ae/>) in the areas mostly where no libraries existed. Up to now there are 10 public libraries operating under the MCYCD. They include: Abu Dhabi Public Library, at MCYCD head office, Umm al-Quwain Public Library, Delma Public Library in Delma Island and Madinat Zayed Public Library in the AlGharbia, i.e. Abu Dhabi Western Region, Ras al-Khaimah Public Library, Ajman Public Library, Masafi Public Library, Masfoot Public Library, Dibba Al-Fujaira Public Library and Al-Fujaira Public Library in the Northern Emirates. These libraries are located within the Cultural Centres, recently in 2014 a new e-library branch has been added in Abu Dhabi Corniche at the Family Beach hence making access to them easy for individuals coming to attend other cultural activities or events and vice versa. The MCYCD Public Libraries open for the public five days a week, from Sunday through to Thursday and closed on Friday and Saturday and public holidays. They operate a broken shift from 09:00 am to 02:00 pm and from 04:00 pm to 09:00 pm. The total library collection in all 10 libraries includes:

- 65000 titles, of which 350000 volumes are printed and the remaining in electronic format.
- 65 periodicals covering various fields.
- Maps, Atlases, Reports and Statistics.
- Multimedia (CDs, DVDs and other media) (<https://mcycd.gov.ae/> 2015)

In addition to the above, the libraries provide access to five electronic databases for documents and books in Arabic and English. The databases include *ProQuest*, *ebrary*, *elibrary* (curriculum edition), *AlManhal* and *EastView* providing access to archive of classic books from 1820 to 1914 covering a wide range of subjects. Access to electronic resources is available on site in all network libraries.

Abu Eid (2014) reports that the UAE public libraries administer access to information and provision of library services through 30 branches using 290 Full Time Employees (FTE). Its total annual budget for the collection exceeds AED3.7 million (note- respondents population of the study) with an annual average expenditure of AED1.2 million per responding library. The libraries had approximately 600,000 visits during the financial year (FY) 2012 while the number of members eligible for borrowing exceeded 57,000 members for all public libraries

in the same year. Two of the libraries provided the percentage of satisfaction of their users as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: UAE Public Libraries summary data for 2012**

Library	No. of library branches	Collection Size (Number of volumes)	Number of Staff (Full Time Employees)	Annual budget for collection (AED)	No. of Visits (FY 2012)	No. of library members	Level of customer satisfaction FY 2012
<b>MCYCDL</b>	10	350000	35	1,000000	135000	35000	85%
<b>ADNL</b>	6	NA	120	NA	117761	NA	NA
<b>DPL</b>	8	462355	91	1,830000	318240	16819	77%
<b>SPL</b>	6	383992	44	900000	25621	5302	NA
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>3,730000</b>	<b>596622</b>	<b>57121</b>	<b>Avg. 81%</b>

**Key**

MCYCDL= Ministry of Culture Youth and Community Development Library

ADNL= Abu Dhabi National Library

DPL= Dubai Public Library

SPL= Sharjah Public Library

**Innovative Libraries: Libraries in Neighbourhoods and Public Space**

These are a result of a tripartite collaboration between the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (TCA), The National Library/Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development and ADM. The Cultural Foundation was originally located in the CBD at AlHosn but in 2009 the library shifted and the collection was moved to Mussaffah industrial area while plans were underway as to where to open the new National Library that will be accessible to the public. From 2010 the National Library embarked on a mission of opening libraries they refer to as neighbourhood libraries. This is part of the plan of setting-up libraries in all neighbourhoods across Abu Dhabi Emirate; such libraries are taken to the people to allow them easy access at convenient times and locations with parking spaces where they can achieve multiple goals.

In the process of opening more libraries, the National Library realised the need to collaborate with other entities with similar goals for the community and thus joined forces with the ADM. The ADM came into play equipped with results of surveys conducted by ADM and other entities such as the Urban Planning Council in 2011 to establish community needs for services that will improve their lives. The survey conducted in Abu Dhabi Island interviewed members of 3,370 households and 3,173 households in Abu Dhabi mainland. Results revealed that there was a great demand for libraries, parks and shopping malls throughout the emirate. The partners came up with a model for projects that would enhance the needed services with the goal of making a positive impact on the community through developing public libraries in residential areas, this would enable positive impact through education, leisure and cultural activities (Abu Eid, 2014).

### **The Public Libraries Joint Project**

Collaboration between ADM and TCA, NL/MCYCD. All parties had an interest in serving and improving the quality of life for Abu Dhabi residents in order to build a knowledge economy. On the one hand the ADM objectives are:

- i. To achieve Abu Dhabi City Municipality vision of providing distinguished community services in all areas of the city by providing an ideal environment for long-life learning, gaining knowledge, self-development and for spending leisure time for all community members.
- ii. To establish a modern public libraries network that provides a diverse library collection, high quality library services, library programs and activities to advance community members talents and skills and to enjoy leisure time/recreation.

While those of the TCA and National Library are to establish Public Libraries in Abu Dhabi so as to fulfil three main roles of public libraries including:

- i. Educational; by providing a diverse library collection in form of print, non-print materials, as well as electronic resources that meet needs of the community in all levels of education, both formal and informal.
- ii. Cultural; organizing library programs and activities that support the UAE national identity, respect cultural diversity and participate in dialogue of civilizations throughout lecture, seminar and meeting opportunities, language and information literacy programs and
- iii. Recreational; by providing a set of well-prepared activities and programing to enjoy/spend leisure time in a useful and meaningful manner for all members of the

community especially for children and young people by providing them with an opportunity to advance their skills and support talents.

In order to have a successful completion and sustainable project and for the Public Libraries to function effectively, roles and responsibilities for each of the partners were defined. The ADM was responsible for providing and maintaining the infrastructure. Specifically they were responsible for:

- i. providing spaces/buildings for public libraries in agreed/selected public spaces according to the approved plans to meet role and needs of TCA/MCYCD in the current and future public facilities and spaces
- ii. Provision of all operational requirements such as maintenance, cleaning and security etc. to ensure the ideal and quality usage of libraries, as well as modifying/rehabilitating the existing buildings to meet partner's requirements.
- iii. Providing partners with results of all studies conducted, complaints, and suggestions relating to partners work for improvement of services delivered to the community.

On the other hand TCA/MCYCD is responsible for management and development of activities relating to culture, heritage and libraries (Abu Eid 2014). Specifically TCA/MCYCD, through the National Library is expected:

- i. To manage and operate public libraries in the spaces and or buildings allocated by ADM i.e. provide library services in park, beach and community centres according to their system.
- ii. to support ADM in organizing and implementing activities and programs that serve the community in the field of libraries
- iii. To collaborate with ADM in coordinating marketing and promotional campaigns which will held in ADM facilities and assets.

Memorandum of understanding was signed hence the beginning of the development of neighbourhood libraries in Abu Dhabi.

The project implementation and completion schedule is summarized in Table 2.

The UAE and Arabian Gulf Library, which was located on the Corniche in March 2010, had to be relocated to Khalifa Park due to the fact that it was challenging for researchers to access the collection as a result of shortage of parking in the city, in addition it is paid parking as

such researchers would have had to incur unexpected expenses. At Khalifa Park there is ample gratis parking.

**Table 2: Public Libraries Project Completion Schedule 2012-2015**

**Public Parks Libraries**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Completion Date</b>
AlBahia Park Library	November 2012
Khalifa Park Library	April 2013
AlWathba Park Library	December 2015

**Public Beach Libraries**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Date Due</b>
Family Beach – Abu Dhabi Corniche	April 2014
AlBateen Beach	October 2015

The Al Bateen Children’s collection was distributed amongst all the other libraries to create the children’s sections. This formed the basis of children’s libraries in the neighbourhood; It was seen as a better move to keep the collections in public libraries where children from neighbourhood school may visit with their teachers and classmates as school visits as well as visit at other times with their parent rather than keeping the collection in one specialized location where children have to travel. While the Al Bateen Library was busy, the current children’s libraries also kept the pace with many school visits in the mornings. Librarians at the Mazyad Mall children’s library informed us that during busy times they may have over 100 children from the neighbouring schools.

The Al Marfa Public Library was launched in 2014. It is a result of collaboration between TCA, ADCO, Etisalat and Al Gharbia Municipality (ADCO Newsletter 2012). It is located in Marfa in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi. This again is focused on providing facilities for members of the community, scholars and researchers located in the Western Region. The library collection includes general collection of fiction and non-fiction books, reference resources and periodicals. Wi-Fi and Internet facilities as well as reference services and reprographics (The National Library).

### **Libraries in Shopping Mall**

Malls have become an attraction to library and mall management, they are seeing it as a way of expanding their clientele/patrons. Libraries attract book lovers to visit and borrow materials, while mall management and retailers are expecting the shoppers to browse their stock and to purchase some goods before leaving. In reality this is what happens and both the mall and library management enjoy the benefits of co-sharing the space. In addition libraries in the mall are not expensive as building a stand-alone purpose built building, library management can save on building costs and use the funds to expanding the collection. In Abu Dhabi, the National Library and TCA opened up two public libraries in the shopping malls; Mazyad Mall and Alain Mall. These were a result of researches conducted in order to set benchmarks for libraries in Abu Dhabi. The National Library of Singapore Board with a number of mall libraries played a key role in influencing the decision. This was also supported by the survey conducted by the Urban Planning Council of Abu Dhabi household survey of 2011. The advantages of these mall libraries include hours of operation whereby the library is in operation when the shops are open. Allowing some members of the family to shop while others are using the library. Both mall libraries provide facilities for Internet (desktop computers) and Wi-Fi for free a service that most people cannot live without.

### **Libraries in Public Parks**

There are two libraries operating in Abu Dhabi parks and recreations. These are a result of collaboration between Abu Dhabi TCA, National Library and ADM with the goal of expanding services to the people and creating and enhancing cultural awareness (National Library 2014). Al Bahia Park Library was opened in November 2012. It occupies about 890 square meters and has a collection of about 20,000 titles (Abu Eid 2014). Their main efforts are directed towards children, hence organizing a lot of activities to develop the love of reading and creativity among children and young adults. The library is located in the outskirts of Abu Dhabi city in Al Bahia area, near Shahama. It serves patrons from AlBahia and surrounding neighbourhoods and schools.

**Figure 6: Al Bahia Public Library**



Khalifa Park was launched in March 2013. It is located in the new neighbourhood in Abu Dhabi Island inside a park. It occupies an area of approximately 1500 square meters. The collection includes special and rare collection, Children’s library, dissertations and thesis, general collection books fiction and non- fiction.

**Figure 7: Khalifa Public Library**



**Figure 8: Khalifa Public Library- Main Hall Collections**



A third park library, AlWathba Park library is under renovation. This will serve Al Wathab residents and surrounding areas such as Al Nahdha. The library total area is 680 m<sup>2</sup>. It includes a children's section and a public reading hall. The expected total collection will be around 12000 items



**Figure 9: Al Wathba Public Library- Indore design**



### **Public Beach Libraries**

Public libraries on the beach have been mushrooming around the world such as in Spain, Holland, France, Bulgaria along the Black Sea and Bondi Beach in Sydney (Mier 2014), just to mention a few. In 2014, a beach library was opened in Abu Dhabi along the Corniche beach. So far there is only one library located at the Abu Dhabi Corniche Beach (see figure..). This library was added to the National Library profile in response to citizen needs as expressed in the survey (The National 2014) and after conducting further research in other beach libraries around the world and establishing benchmarks indicating that it will benefit members of the public. Although only opened in April 2014, the library has proved to be a favourite spot for beach lovers and the community leaving in the Corniche neighbourhood. The collection includes mainly e-resources, with a few print copies of reference resources, fiction, non-fiction and children's books. Desktop computers and iPads are available for patrons use to access the electronic resources. The library occupies an area of about 60 square meters (Abu Eid 2014).

**Figure 10: Corniche Beach Library**



**Figure 11: Corniche Beach Library- Collections**



Membership is as the other public libraries where the applicant has to pay dhs 400 refundable deposit, and borrow 2 books for 2 weeks, renewable two more times. Fines for late return are charged and for consistent delinquents, membership may be withdrawn. Like any other library the patron pays for any damages that may occur to a library item while in their care/loan.

### **Al Kitab Bus- Mobile Library Service**

This is a mobile library service that started in 2009 as one of the National Library initiatives to take library services to people. This was literary implemented as taking services to reach patrons at their door steps with the goal of inculcating the love of books and reading. The main focus was on children, and thus the target was schools, especially in the Western Region where there were no libraries at that time. The Kitab bus services was inaugurated in Al Ain during the Alain Reads celebrations, another one of The National Library and TCA initiatives for motivating the community to read and the love of literature and arts. During such events, various book publishers and vendors are invited to participate and sale books, organize children's activities, author lectures, presentations and workshops.

The Kitab Bus initiative is a collaboration between government agencies and private and non-profit organizations that have seen the importance of spreading the love of books to create an informed society hence building and sustaining a knowledge economy. The project sponsors included The Zayed Giving Initiative, Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Emirates Transport, the German Cultural Centre in the Gulf, the Swiss Embassy, Abu Dhabi Media Company and Al Ain Municipality (<https://www.abudhabi.ae/portal>). The National Library and ADACH (now TCA) have always aimed at community involvement and partnership, and the Kitab Bus is evidence of that. Currently the service is being revisited to find a better way of implementing the service.

### **Conclusion**

Although late starters, the UAE Public Library scene is highly developed, thinking of innovative ways of taking services to the people and ensuring that they have the technology they need to access the information. In addition forming partnerships with non for profit organizations, government and private institutions for the common good has also enhanced the success of public libraries in UAE. They are useful in that they express the effectiveness of local and national government willpower and involvement, in collaboration with the

private sector in supporting public libraries. Conducting community needs assessment has been the foundation of good practice as services have been provided at the point of need. In addition defining roles and responsibilities, clearly identifies the party responsible for each activity hence removing confusion and identifying key players and their contributions to the partnership and the project.

In conclusion as said by Sydney Sheldon “libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to improving our quality of life. Libraries change lives for the better.”(Goodreads). The UAE is a unique example because developments are taking place at a fast pace. However, the effectiveness of the public library system is an example to learn from. Some of the lessons include the need for pro-activeness, accountability and transparency, advocacy, instructional/ advisory abilities (therefore being always informed about issues and events in order to be an informed information provider), and the creation of strategic alliances both within the librarian community and with relevant others.

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