

Mbale public library in sorry state

Justification. The facility operates in a dilapidated building and bookshelves are being eaten away by termites.

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MBALE. Mbale Public Library, which was constructed by the colonial government in 1953, is in a dilapidated building and lacks modern reading materials.

The government library, which has the capacity to accommodate about 80 people per day, is mainly used by primary and secondary school students.

More than 15 years ago, the facility was ranked among the top five libraries in the country. It used to operate from Kitutu House owned by Bugisu Cooperative Union but was in 2007 evicted over nonpayment of rent.

Shs18m

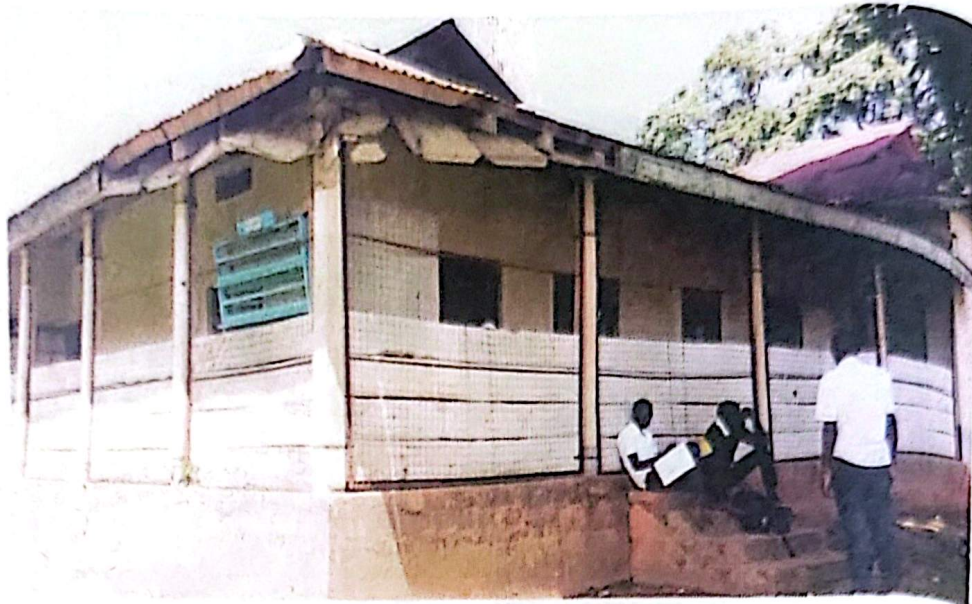
THE AMOUNT OF MONEY THE LIBRARY RECEIVES FROM NATIONAL LIBRARY COUNCIL PER ANNUM

It is now housed in what users call 'sorry tiny rooms' that were once the headquarters of the Mbale District administration on Republic Street.

Ms Hellen Ossaba, the assistant librarian, says the library is rotting away.

"But what pains me more is that the local government leadership and other stakeholders are looking on as it goes down," she says.

Ms Ossaba adds that the decision to hand over the management of the library to the municipal authorities in 2000 following the enactment of the Local Government Act 1997 was "a big mistake that has been



Dilapidated. Students revise their notes outside Mbale Public Library recently. PHOTO BY ARNOLD WADERO

quickenning its death". "The problem is with the council. The technical and political leaders seem to see no value in this library," she adds.

The visibly dilapidated rooms are being eaten away by termites and bookshelves have not been spared either. It still displays books no longer relevant to the students' syllabus

"We have lost out on the periodical materials such as news journals and office equipment such as desktops because of termites," Ms Ossaba says.

Poorly equipped

Currently, the library has 10 desktops and three i5 core Hewlett Packer (HP) laptops which were donated by donors.

Mr Cornelius Wekunya, a member of the governing board, says limited funding from the municipal council and the National Library Council is responsible for the poor state of the facility.

"We used to get Shs87 million annually from the National Library Council but we now get Shs18 million," he says.

"The council has allocated only Shs3 million quarterly, which is hard to come by, and at the same time not enough

for smooth running and maintenance of the library," he says.

Mr Wekunya says the library would be sustainable if it had its own home.

"We have been demanding for a plot to build our own home for years but the council leadership has never prioritised it," he says.

He says this would solve the problem of limited space.

"The council is stuck with 30,000 books and thousands are still kept in the corridors due to lack of space," he says.

He says lack of accommodation has also affected the integration of information communication and technology initiatives.

"We have now improvised other means because we have no way out. We now charge library users," says a library caretaker. Secondary students are charged Shs3,000 per term

BACKGROUND

Concern. Mbale Public Library was constructed by the colonial government in 1953. However, limited funding has put the future of the facility at stake.

while those in tertiary and university students pay Shs5,000.

Mr Kassimu Madagi, a councillor and member of the district social works committee, says they have on numerous occasions tasked the town clerk to explain why the council has failed to allocate land for the construction of a library.

Accumulated bills

"We are concerned and have been tasking the technical leaders to give us answers but in vain," he says.

He says the library is struggling to pay electricity and water bills and that it has even failed to avail newspapers to the readers.

The library is also facing the challenge of understaffing as it has five employees

However, Mr Kenneth Katuli, the deputy town clerk, says they are doing what they can to support the library.

"We supporting the library with the money we have. We would have allocated it land but we do not have it now," he says.

He also appealed to government to increase the budget allocated to the libraries in the country.