

SUSTAINING AFRICAN DEMOCRACIES: THE LIBRARY AS A KEY PARTNER*

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Introduction

Information has become very important in the development world today. It is currently believed to be the fourth factor of production after land, labour and capital. Brandin and Harrison (1987)¹ say “information wealth is now a new type of capital described as knowledge capital”. It is the catalyst, which will shoot Africa towards prosperity. Library and information workers in Africa therefore have a key role in making this happen.

Bergdahl (1989) also observes that information has become such a precious resource that the fate of modern nations in all essentials is connected with their capacity to develop and exploit it... that in future, countries which do not develop this capacity will be left behind in the cultural, scientific, and economic development. Apart from suffering from dependence on others, such countries will neither be partners in the global production of information nor contribute meaningfully to the common future of civilisation.²

IFLA in its statement about libraries and sustainable development emphasises that libraries and information services promote sustainable development by ensuring freedom of access to information. Libraries and information services help people to improve educational and social skills, which are indispensable in an information society for sustained participation in democracy.³

Access to and use of information assist greatly in good decision-making and subsequently increased development, flourishing democracy and economy.

Governments in Africa produce a great amount of public information, which will improve the public's understanding of their activities if they are well disseminated. Official information is about and for people. People need to be informed in order to make informed decisions and critical choices. The lack of this can be disastrous as it breeds ignorance, oppression, poverty, disease, poor economic development and misgovernment. In the same vein is education crucial to man. It provides the means for an effective and meaningful participation in all aspects of society. It makes one to be fully constituted as it makes one aware of one's society, where he stands in it, and what he does in it. The Library's role in these activities cannot be ignored.

Information brings about knowledge and knowledge is power. Lack of it brings about knowledge deficiency, which leads to powerlessness. Powerlessness of a people is a time bomb, which can be expressed in various forms, which are detrimental to a nation's progress. Dissemination of information, which affects a people's livelihood is of great importance and libraries are well placed to do this.

Free and universal access to information is often upheld as a major tenet of a democratic society. Riley and Relyea (1983)⁴ say ... it includes the right to access of information... to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.

Governments must be useful to the governed in order to have their unflinching support. One of the measurements of usefulness is the free flow of information from the government to the governed, most of whom have made personal sacrifices towards the institution and maintenance of democracy.

Democracy in Africa

Most African governments fought and got liberated from colonialism in the last century. In several cases there were loss of lives in the process of wrestling power from colonial and neo-colonial forces to achieve independence. Soon after some of these governments got into problems including wars, military rule, and several forms of natural and human calamities

In the 1990s, Africa started breathing some clean air of democracy. Some countries like Niger, Benin, Mali, Zambia elected their first Presidents. South Africa, a real success story also came on board. Ghana and Nigeria, which had had several years of military rule also elected Presidents. In 1997, the economic growth in Africa went up to 4.6% from 3.3% in 1995. 21 countries had a GDP growth rate of 5% or higher, and at least 38 countries had positive GDP per capita growth rates⁵. This shows that Africa was gradually doing well. In the same 1990s, civil society and other forces struggled to change the political, cultural and economic situations in their societies in the quest for justice and freedom. Men and women formed democratic movements in several countries like, Nigeria, Rwanda, Mozambique, Morocco, Benin, and South Africa to bring about the second liberation which is related to change and development.

The dawn of the 21st century brought in hope of economic and political stability, technological advancement, hope for the provision of the basic necessities of life – potable water, food, shelter, health care, and education. These can be achieved if good planning is involved. These aspirations cannot be achieved overnight without investing in the generation, management and use of information. It is however sad to say that most African countries after independence have launched several development plans – short, medium, and long – but these have not achieved the desired results because attention was not paid to good information management.

One bad reoccurring scene in African democracy is the fact that most of the leaders do not know or listen to their people. They also do not know when it is time to leave the podium. Rather, they surround themselves with praise singers who on daily basis assure them that all is well with the people when it is not so. When there are genuine protests over pertinent issues, they are explained away as handiworks of the opposition parties, and so the security forces either clamp down and injure protesters or arrest key opposition leaders. They fail to realise that the ingredients for the soup of agitation and civil unrests are being assembled.

Bad governments, military rule, wars and natural disasters have affected the economies of various African countries. New democracies do not last because the citizenry is now politically awake and so do not have patience with any government which does not honour its promises.

When governments refuse to inform the citizenry about issues affecting them in the process of governance there can be chaos. They must communicate new facts effectively. Opinions are formed with or without information, the former being preferable as it casts out all doubts. Informed men and women can protect liberties.

Western media often portray Africa as “being endowed” with bad governments, poverty, hunger, ethnic clashes, un-ending wars, diseases, ignorance, poor communication and a host of negatives. It is true that African democracies today are being heavily weighed down by economic and social problems in the face of limited resources. They are faced with providing good infrastructure, including water and electricity, reducing poverty, making available good health and education facilities, stimulating economic activity, servicing and reducing foreign debts, developing a strong agricultural base, etc. In addition, are civil unrests brought about by disenchanting electorates.

In the face of these challenges, one is tempted to be a pessimist and to wonder, whether African democracy will live and thrive in our times. Hope need not be lost as Africa will come out of the woods. African democracies will live if both the government and the governed decide to forge ahead together to develop an efficient and effective system of governance to meet these challenges of development, which are inevitable.

Governance stands for the practical exercise of power and authority by governments in the management of their affairs in general and of economic development in particular⁶. This means there are stakeholders in governance, who make inputs and also demand accountability from government. Governance is effective when there is good information flow between the governed and the governing. This gives birth to development. Governance

therefore must have an effective administrative capacity and machinery to succeed, and one of them is information provision which libraries are the best providers.

Democracy in Africa will thrive with effective communication of information and relevant education. These encourage critical thinking, good situational analysis and sufficient knowledge of the rights, privileges and responsibilities for acceptable response. The library, which has been an age long provider of relevant information can still do this.

Information on the machinery/operations of government must be made available to the citizenry if the government wants to be transparent. Transparency draws people to believe in the government. People are needed for the development of a country and Palanivel and Park⁷ (2002) confirm this when they say, that “To be successful, sustainable development laws and policies need to have the support of the people”. This is not people per se, but a well- informed and literate people, which a library can make out of a country’s people.

Challenges faced by libraries

For about three decades now, libraries in Africa have not been in good shape. From school through public to special and academic libraries, the same problems present themselves, making it difficult for them to discharge the duties expected of them effectively.

School libraries are where the firm foundation for a reading culture, independent and resourceful learning are laid in the citizenry in their formative years.

Public libraries are the haven for students, regular and part time, where they have access to textbooks. They also provide general informational and educational materials to the public, from children to the aged.

Academic libraries provide current information to support teaching, learning and research.

All these types of libraries are not functioning to expectation because of low priority given to their development. Inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, including telephone and electricity, limited qualified personnel, inadequate ICT facilities, lack of technical support for ICT, are some of the major factors that limit the support African libraries can give to the sustenance of democracies. . It should be noted that libraries by nature and functions, provide a service without direct financial gains. They are meant to be non-profit making as they create opportunities for education, information, economic development, leisure reading etc. They assist greatly in a successful democratic society. This therefore means that they should not be measured with services which are meant to be profit oriented when funds are being allocated.

There is therefore the need for governments to exhibit the genuine desire to have information disseminated, by putting the necessary structures, including ICT facilities and adequate funding in place. Government will also need to invest heavily in ICT hardware and software for libraries to enable them to be used for quick and easy dissemination of information. Telecommunication systems must also be improved tremendously.

Governments need to be educated that libraries are very useful in organising and disseminating information. This education must be done with all seriousness, informing them that by training and practice, librarians create, manage, package, preserve and disseminate knowledge more effectively including the much needed government information resources. Africa needs to participate effectively in the new information order so it needs to have modern information management equipment and to manage them skills in all its libraries. ICTs need to be the central hub of all library functions, especially the use of Internet which is the world wide network, bringing top class communication, resource sharing and access to current information to the door step of African libraries. The availability of electronic information on the Internet aids greatly in research.

These are lacking in most libraries, so they cannot perform the roles expected of them.

Governments need to do their own part to enable libraries to also do theirs in order to part to sustain democracies.

Role of Libraries

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA,2004)⁸ in its contribution to the World Summit on the Information Society stated clearly that libraries “ contribute effectively to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom, safeguarding democratic values and universal civil rights (emphasis mine)._They encourage social inclusion by striving to serve all those in their user communities regardless of age, gender, economic or employment status, literacy or technical skills, cultural or ethnic origin, religious or political beliefs, sexual orientation and physical or mental ability” This is all inclusive and spells out the very existence of libraries.

Libraries the world over, provide information for development. They are engines for development. If governments want them to be buoyant and active, they can, and they in turn can make governments buoyant and active too. Since most African governments rarely rely on tested and tried data or reliable information sources which are mostly kept in libraries, they do not place any high premium on development of libraries.

Between 1974 and 1990, NATIS held conferences and workshops in several countries in Africa to open up a relationship between librarians and government decision makers with the aim of making the latter aware of the need for information in effective planning and decision making. Neill⁹ (1991) reports that the exercise was a waste of time since government officials, planners and decision makers know very little about the use of information and are not prepared to accept the fact that it is very much necessary in development planning.

Librarians need to recognise and put in efforts to make their users information literate. This is very important to enable citizens to participate effectively in

governance. This need is supported by Bundy¹⁰ (2003) when he states that a thriving national and global culture, economy and democracy will be advanced best by people who are able to recognise their need for information and are able to identify locate , access, evaluate and apply the needed information

This is the global information age. Power is being focused and managed by people with access to information. Any nation, which does not give easy access to national and global information stands to be marginalized. Librarians are trained in the management of information so their role has become inherently political and vital to the success of democracies. Librarians must therefore position themselves to take on this challenge to make Africa compete effectively. Librarians must be proactive and not wait to be invited before making constructive contributions.

A nation without a history cannot thrive. History enables mistakes of the past to be avoided and achievements of the past improved upon to facilitate good governance. History of a country is part of its collection of indigenous knowledge. Harnessing and documenting indigenous knowledge is therefore very important. Again, indigenous African knowledge is lacking in the global information world. Such information in fields like, agriculture, medicine, science and technology, folklore etc. generated daily in Africa are not well marketed or disseminated. Librarians need to collect, organise and disseminate them widely. Invariably such information support national development since they are primary source material.

Librarians need to carry out user needs assessment in order to use the results to plan properly and provide information which will meet their identified needs. The days of making wild choices in book selection with the hope of people using them some time are gone as such books have been known as permanent shelf sitters when funds to acquire them could have been used for books with high demand. The identification of basic information needs also allows for life long learning for the empowerment of the society.

The African Information Society Initiative (AISI) embraced by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) looks up to information as the driving force for development. AISI's vision is to have a sustainable information society in Africa by 2010.¹¹ This means library professionals must gear up in their responsibilities to create, organise and give access to information to support government efforts. This can be done through several ways some being ensuring that there are libraries or at least reading rooms in all areas, urban and rural, in the country which are stocked with all kinds of information for self-development as well as knowledge of the workings of government. The use of ICT here will further enhance service delivery since there will be easy access and great amount of information.

Most governments in Africa have websites, which indicate that ICTs are in application for good governance. Though ICT is very useful in dissemination of government information, poor infrastructure, lack of access to technology in rural/remote areas, low levels of literacy (computer based and general) lack of content in local languages and a high level of poverty and under privileged class, usually become barriers to successful implementation, and the desire by libraries to work effectively. However, the provision of tele centres in some countries, and for example, phone shops in Senegal with Internet access and "information boutiques" in Burkina Faso which collect and distribute information¹² are very remarkable starters towards a wider scale of information dissemination, on the continent.

Democracy can be enhanced, by setting up an interactive online service between government and the governed. Public debates can also be encouraged on hot government issues. This can be taken up by libraries, as another extension service rather than concentrate only on story telling hours, quiz competitions and arts and crafts activities.

There is the need for librarians to make an inward search, a real soul search, to find out if we are really living our vision, providing services, which are relevant to the survival of the people. If the results are in the affirmative, we will beat our

chests, otherwise efforts should be made to right the wrongs if we do not want to be marginalized and our jobs taken over by charlatans.

African librarians need to link up researchers and scholars within the continent and with their counterparts in the developed world through ICT. This is to exchange information, among which is that which will support democracies and development. CD ROMs can be provided for those who are not online. The much needed African indigenous knowledge can hit the world stage through these links as well as transfer of technology from the North to the South.

Library schools have to revise their curricula to accommodate the use of modern technology and methods in service provision so that their output can offer more attractive services in the process of governance.

Information networks should be developed among libraries in Africa to access each other's resources, learn from each other to enable them to introduce new techniques into service provision for the citizenry.

National and Regional Library Associations need to be revived and strengthened. They often act as pressure groups on government to support library development issues which will produce effective service to support governance. They will also provide a high level of professionals who will make the profession and its activities more visible.

Librarians need to be visible. We must stop keeping to ourselves and rub shoulders with other professionals who are riding high in activities for nation building. We need to stand up and be counted rather than stay within our shelves and only insist on "no noise" from our users. We are top class professionals who are very vibrant with a mission to service society.

Librarians need to be strong advocates to make libraries to live and grow so that they can support democracies. This is very important because funds for services are dwindling daily and there is fierce competition for public funds, so the "loudest" gets the lion's share.

At LIASA's inaugural conference, the Provincial Minister of Sports, Arts, Culture, Science and Technology declared that "let me say at the very outset that African renaissance can only be realised if we build a solid foundation of a well – informed society that can make well informed decisions to enhance and sustain our newly found democracy. The question is, whether this could be possible in a situation where the infrastructure for library and information services is in the state of neglect and starved of all necessary resources. My answer is clearly no, perhaps your's is otherwise" Subsequently LIASA made a 5 point policy issue to be adopted by the government¹³. The 5-point policy issue was:

1. Ensure that by the year 2004 every community and school in South Africa has access to a well – stocked library or information resource centre.
2. Ensure that by the year 2004, all community and school libraries have got access to information through appropriate utilisation of technology including links to Internet.
3. Zero – rating on books, magazines and other information media of educational value for the purpose of value added tax.
4. Ensure that the library community and LIASA as its representative body are fully consulted by the government in all discussions and initiatives relating to the provision of information, including the national virtual library, multipurpose community centre and information service and
5. Put in place without further delay the proposed National Advisory Council on libraries and information services.

LIASA has been able to tread where other National Library Associations have feared, but now, I am tempted to ask, whether the 5 – point policy issue has been achieved since the year 2004, the deadline stated in it, has only 3 months life left in it. Surely, if librarians must be relevant as partners in the success of democracies in Africa then much more advocacy is needed to make us visible and change visions into realities.

Conclusion

The importance of information is not disputable. Every nation needs information, be it global or indigenous. Governments need to access and use information for development. Libraries are very capable of harnessing and managing all types of information, if provided with adequate funding and facilities.

For any democratic government to be taken seriously in the world it has to make its mark on the world political map. Information availability to assist in decision – making is an aspect of the process towards making the mark. For a long time African libraries have been mostly relying on information produced outside the continent. It will be a welcome change and make a great impact on the world, when efforts are made to encourage libraries to create, organise and disseminate the much needed indigenous information.

The need for governments to strengthen libraries and their infrastructure to enable them carry out their role as an effective partner in democratic governance is very paramount.

Libraries are very relevant to the success of democracies as they are the main means for the provision of free, easily accessible information to all ages and levels of the people. Public libraries need special attention, as they play a far important role than other libraries in its educational and informational functions which cut across the sections of the society. It is the main channel which information from government can easily pass through to the citizenry and also organize activities to take back the views of the citizenry to government. Public libraries are closer to the people than any other libraries so governments should work closely with them to send their policies across to the people.

The challenge to libraries to be effective partners in sustaining democracies can be surmounted when governments accept the fact that they need libraries to among other roles, organize and disseminate information, including those they create in their day to day governance, so that the citizens will be better informed

to participate effectively in governance. Accepting the fact means making available funds and facilities needed by libraries to carry out their roles effectively. I believe that with strong advocacy we shall overcome and in the near future libraries will become the hub on which government decision-making and planning machinery revolve.

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