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A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF BACKLOG CHALLENGES AT NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE AND THE ACCESS IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Backlog challenges are topical issues in archives across the globe. Currently, the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), has a backlog estimated to be above 22 000 cubic feet and this has adversely affected its mandate to provide access. This article argues that the processing backlog being faced today by NAZ is not a new phenomenon that emerged recently but it has developed over time, it is as old as the existence of the archival institution itself. The article reviewed NAZ Director's annual reports on the Harare Records Centre and the Public Archives and Research sections of NAZ. An analysis of the National Archives Act, No. 8 of 1986 was done to assess the guiding legal framework under which the backlog increased. It also explores and assesses the effectiveness of some of the measures that were put in place to try and deal with backlog challenges in both the colonial and postcolonial periods. The article goes on to suggest possible strategies on how processing backlogs can be dealt with to promote increased access to public records. It also looks at the structural challenges of the institution juxtaposed to a rising tide of public offices. To date, NAZ remains one of the smallest departments in Government despite the pressing reasons demanding its expansion. The backlog challenge at NAZ is depriving the researchers their right to access information and it goes against the national goal of promoting research.

Keywords: Archival backlogs, recordkeeping, National Archives of Zimbabwe, records accumulations

Introduction

Backlog in general terms can be defined as arrears of work. In archival discourse, backlog has been defined as materials received by a repository but not yet processed (Pearce-Moses 2005). Cook (1977:99) suggested that, backlogs can refer to a mass of un-catalogued material, much of which has come to the repository in a large consignment, and secondly to the mass of material which has been processed and described inadequately or according to obsolete standards in the past. Studies by Garaba (2010) and Mnjama (2006) revealed that archival institutions in eastern and southern Africa were faced with a major challenge of unprocessed records. The primary reasons for these backlogs were shown to be staff shortages as personnel tended to leave for greener pastures.

According to the International Council on Archives (ICA) Code of Ethics, Principle 6 (ICA 1996), "Archivists should promote the widest possible access to archival materials and provide an impartial service to all users". The mission statement for National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) is "to acquire, preserve and give access to documentary heritage". Both statements emphasise the need to promote access to archival collections. Thus, NAZ mission statement and ICA code of ethics place the need to promote access at the core of archival business. In 2013 a new national economic blueprint Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET) was adopted which sought to promote research and development among other things (GoZ 2013). It is essential in this article to first highlight how every historical

record is supposed to be accessed. However, the greatest hindrance to achieving this goal is backlog challenges. This research therefore traces the accumulation of archival backlog since the inception of NAZ in 1935 to present.

The evolution of backlog challenges at NAZ

The establishment of National Archives of Southern Rhodesia in 1935 rose from the question of the custody of the British South Africa Company (BSACo.) In 1933 V W Hiller organized a historical exhibition comprising books, pictures, private manuscripts and public records to mark the fortieth anniversary of the conquest of Matabeleland. This exhibition aroused considerable interest which led to the formation of the National Historical Committee (NHC) which subsequently led to the promulgation of the 1935 Archives Act 0n 12 April giving birth to the Government Archives of Southern Rhodesia on the first of September 1935 (Baxter, 1969). Records covering the 45 years period (1890 – 1935) became the first collection of the archives. Baxter (1969: xxix) posits that, "these [records] had been gradually accumulating for forty-five years, many of them in offices with the most primitive storage facilities; no one had taken much care of any but the current records." Hence, from the beginning the archival institution had a backlog spanning a period of forty-five years.

The Central African Archives became a Federal Body on the 1st of July 1954. After a new Federal Archives Act, the name of the archives was changed to National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Public records expanded during the Federation period (1953-1963) when records from Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia (Malawi and Zambia respectively) started trickling in to the Federation`s administrative capital Salisbury, now Harare. The end of the Federation meant that many records created during this period would then need to be made available but had the structures of archives changed to cater for more volumes of records that had been generated? The end of Federation saw much effort being dedicated towards processing manuscripts up to the 1970s. Processing Federal archives became an issue after the lapse of their closure period in the 1980s.

In 1971 progress was made in the processing of Public Archives and the objective of making public all records created before 1941 except those with a security classification (Director's Annual Report 1971). Of interest is that, whilst the focus was on processing public records, the backlog for historical manuscript was accumulating. The Director's Annual Report (1972) noted that the first half of the year proved to be the most satisfying period with the processing of archives covering the dates up to the end of 1942 being virtually completed. The only material remaining to be added were parts of long series still in the Records centre, the bulk of which fall outside the open period. It was then that the administration decided to call a halt to the processing of archives and decided to direct energies on historical manuscripts collection and this continued up to 1976. Likewise, whereas the focus between 1972 and 1976 was on historical manuscripts, the quantity of unprocessed public archives began to accumulate also. This situation was further exacerbated by the establishment of a new division of archives, the Statutory Bodies that was developing its own backlog. Hence, every time the institution was fighting backlog of historical manuscripts that of public archives was accumulating and vice versa.

By 1980 backlog challenges were already being noted as a serious challenge particularly in the area of historical manuscripts. According to the 1981 Director's Annual report the processing of the Public Archives backlog amounted to 36.5 linear metres. In 1983, attention given to several tasks taking priority over routine activities resulted in minimum processing of public archives and manuscripts. As from September 1983 processing of all Public Archives and historical

manuscripts was suspended to allow staff to concentrate on a massive exercise of listing and processing records of the former Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland under the Federal Records Microfilming project with the intention of providing copies to Zambia and Malawi, contributors to the joint archival services of the Federal Body. Work on the Federal Records Microfilm Project proceeded right through to December 31 of 1985.

The year 1986 ushered in a new era in the history of the Archives in the form of the National Archives Act (Chapter 25:06) of 1986. This also presented another challenge which worsened the backlog challenge at NAZ. Prior to the promulgation of the National Archives Act of 1986 the closure period for public records was 30 years. Following this new development, the closure period was reduced to 25 years thereby increasing the processing backlog since the section now had to process those records covering the five-year period (Director's Annual Report 1986). It also notes that as a result of the reduction of the closure period it would take some time before the processing backlog was overcome.

With the successful completion of the Federal records microfilming programme, it was the intention at the beginning of 1987 to make an effort towards effectively reducing the archives and manuscripts processing backlog which had increased considerably partly due to the processing of the Federal records and also as a result of the reduction of the closure period for public records from 30years to 25years. The late 1980s and early 1990s also witnessed yet another challenge in the form of shortage of processing and storage space which resulted in the temporary cessation of processing work. There was a drop in the number of processed archives due to shortage of archiving boxes during this period. By 1992 the backlog had grown to worrisome levels as it stood at 2000 cubic feet currently backlog stands at 22 000 cubic feet (NAZ Backlog Report 2014).

The challenge of shortage of storage space and shelving material developed into a cancer which continues to haunt the NAZ to this present day. This continues to hinder transfer of records from the Records Centres. Records are now being transferred only upon request and only when space is available. This has prompted the Public Archives and Research section to deliberate on the possibilities of de-accessioning archives that have never been requested to create space for the frequently used archives. The 2012 Director's report notes that, "shelving space continues to haunt the Public Archives and Research Section impacting negatively on backlog clearance due to halted transfers from the Records Centres."

Some scholars have associated backlog challenges with the processing criteria employed by an institution. According to the Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries (2012) backlog challenges in an archive can be resolved by: (i) relying on well-defined collecting policies to guide all collecting decisions, (ii) collecting responsibly, (iii) not collecting more than your institution can reasonably make available and (iv) making appraisal decisions before material is accessioned into the repository. These four fundamental principles provide the basis for analysing backlog issues at NAZ in this article.

Backlog at NAZ can be understood in the following dynamics: transferred public archives awaiting processing, public archives in the custody of records centres awaiting transfer to the Public Archives section but cannot be transferred due to shortage of shelving material and finally public records that could be public archives but are still in the custody of creating departments because of non- adherence to depositing procedures or comply to regulations. This article will focus on the first two scenarios. The later will need much devotion to give a fair analysis.

Factors aiding backlog at NAZ

Factors aiding backlog at NAZ include collection policy, structural challenges and capacity, and shortage of space, shelving material and financial constraints. The three factors are discussed below.

Collection policy at NAZ

The National Archives of Zimbabwe has for a very long time has not been able to put into writing its acquisition policy. The researchers of this study carried out a survey to determine the extent to which the Archivists and Records Managers at NAZ were familiar with the NAZ acquisition policy of and its importance to archival business. A sample population of eight staff members was selected from the Harare Records Centre and Public Archives and Research Section (PARS). The PARS Archivists and Harare Records have seven and one Archivists respectively. Their observations were captured in the table 1.

Table 1: Observations on collection policy

Type of Question	Response			
	Yes	No	Not sure	N/A
Does your section have an Acquisition Policy	4	3	1	
If your answer to above is YES have you read and understood the Acquisition Policy	1	2	-	1
During your induction were you made to be aware of the Acquisition Policy?	2	6	-	-
Do you use the Acquisition Policy when acquiring records in your section?	1	7	-	-

Four respondents out of eight acknowledged that their sections had an acquisition policy but two people confessed that they had neither read nor seen it. One person who claimed to have read the document actually said the acquisition policy was contained in the NAZ Act. The other respondent said the policy was something often talked about and inducted verbally but there was no document to talk about. The question was then, can there be a policy that is unwritten? Six people responded that the acquisition policy was neither mentioned nor availed to them during induction. Asked if they make use of the acquisition policy to acquire records, only one respondent confirmed making use of the policy whilst the rest did not. In the Public Archives and Research section it was acknowledged that there was no acquisition policy for manuscripts and archivists would only use their ingenuity and infer value. What could not be agreed was whether NAZ Act sufficiently addresses all acquisition aspects. There are key processes of archiving that are not captured in the Act such as appraisal, accessioning, arrangement and description which are fundamental. The Act is not exhaustive, hence requires supplementary legal instruments such as policy documents to help develop the collection.

Knowing the acquisition policy must be a priority item on induction process. The indication is however that most archivists did not get to be aware of the policies at induction. Can this also

imply that putting in place an acquisition policy will help control backlog? Mazikana (1990a) noted that a basic duty of the archivist is the acquisition of archives. This is a process by which archival institutions add to their archival holdings through accepting material as a donation, transfer, purchase or loan (Schwirtlich and Reed 1993: 137). It is the formal receipt of an accession by a repository (Mazikana and Ngulube 2001: 1). The acquisition process involves formulating an acquisition policy. Acquisition plays a pivotal role in shaping archival holdings and its importance should not be underplayed considering that it involves a commitment of the resources of the archives (Garaba 2010: 97).

Garaba (2010: 225) looking at liberation war indicates how most archival institutions lack when it comes to policies. According to him, "all of the surveyed institutions had mission statements but ironically, policies were not captured in written form" (Garaba 2010: 225). Collection policies and plans can be helpful, but they cannot make decisions for you. Archivists should not push to collect quantities; quantities do not add up to success but should be guided by what is called intellectual frameworks (concern at core disposal).

At NAZ the presence of a backlog of records due to receive their retention and disposal schedules also explains potential breeding ground for archival backlog as well as depriving researchers of their right to access to valuable historical records. This group of records is not part of the 22 000c.ft backlog at NAZ. In essence this entails that backlog is much more than the stated. In addition to this, there are records that are still in custody of creating departments, which are yet to be deposited to archives but are already archival. An exercise to enumerate these is necessary.

Structural challenges and capacity

Records deemed archival are transferred from the records centres to Public Archives and Research Section (PARS) for processing. The Records Centres and PARS have had a fixed structure of 2 archivists and 7archivists respectively for more than 35 years now. In 1980 Zimbabwe had line 21 line ministries and 17 parastatals, currently there are 26 Ministries, 91 parastatals and local authorities. According to the Archives Act records from all these public offices are the responsibility of NAZ. This means that NAZ must proportionally respond to the expansion of the central government. This structural inflexibility foster inefficiency in processing records.

Garaba (2010: 229) states that:

> Staff has a large backlog of archival documentation to deal with. This is because the institution has never had enough staff to cope with the incoming work as well as to deal with backlogs. The provision of contract workers really helps permanent staff to deal with the backlog. This backlog situation is not unique to the institution but occurs in most archives.

In 2014 the High Court of Zimbabwe made 16 deposits to the Harare Records centre (National Archives Transmittal Lists for High Court 2014). Each of the deposits had a quantity of 50cubic feet making it a total of 800c.ft. Cognisant of the challenges of shelving material it should be noted that there are restrictions to number of deposits to be made. If the archivists in Public Archives and Research Section have a yearly processing target of 1200c.ft it means that about 67% of their annual target is met by one creating department thus, making transfers from other creating departments accumulating as backlog. What makes the situation even more complicated is the fact that the figures given above are from Harare Records Centre alone and does not include transfers from the provincial Records centres who also feed into Public archives collection. What more shall it be with backlog inclusive of all provincial records centres?

Shortage of space, shelving material and financial constraints

Transfer of records to the Public Archives and Research Section has often been done in small quantities because the receiving office does not have sufficient space to store these records. Furthermore, the Public Archives and Research Section is faced with a serious challenge of lack of shelving material to shelve processed archives. Another related challenge has been shortage of shelving material. In addition to this, is the untimely release of funds which are often inadequate to meet the organisational needs and this have resulted in erratic supply of processing provisions such as milk, dust masks, dust coats to mention just thereby affecting the flow of work at PARS. Resources permitting, there would be need to both purchase enough shelving material and put in place more repositories to cater for expanding collections.

Efforts to curb backlog at NAZ

In 2013 great efforts to arrest the ever-increasing backlog were made possible by the backlog reduction project that was approved by the Permanent Secretary which saw $31,000 acquired from casino grants going towards that (Report: 2013). This involved students from universities. Of importance, here is the involvement of high offices in acknowledging the seriousness of backlog challenges at NAZ thereby hindering the department's mission on providing access to the nation's documentary heritage.

Mnjama (2006) puts into perspective a scenario like NAZ finds itself in. He says where there are few trained archivists, the only way to overcome backlog accumulations is by adopting a series of cooperative workshop. From 2010 NAZ undertook an exercise that seems to have been informed by Mnjama`s school of thought. Practicums were organised between NAZ and the Records and Archives Management (RAM) department of the National University of Science Technology (NUST) in Bulawayo. All final year RAM students would engage in a week or two weeks processing programme at one of NAZ offices either in Bulawayo or Harare. Usually the number of students would range between 18 and 25. The exercise has also helped NUST RAM students gain practical appreciation of the records and archives management while at the same time affording those students who would not have an opportunity to work in an archival institution during their attachment period as NAZ usually would attach at most only 4 students from RAM department per each academic year. This arrangement has helped NAZ in a great deal to reduce the archival backlog as more volumes of records were processed.

The practicums went on for three consecutive years. Practicums had their own fair share of criticism. On the part of NAZ processing priorities were given to single series records mainly for two reasons: they occupy the largest space or percentage of unprocessed records and that they are easier to process for learners or untrained people. What this would mean is that by the end of every practicum programme more records would have been processed than NAZ staff would have done alone. This meant that more single class of records would have been added to the list of those accessible. In 2011, a one week practicum would add a total footage of about 450 cubic feet. In 2012 another 234 cubic feet was added. Public Archives and Research section archivists (6) are required to process an average of 50c.ft per quarter per individual that amounts to a total footage of 1 200 per year. It is not always the case that this target of 1 200c.ft is reached since in most cases there are issues such as shortage of shelving material that hinders processing.

Although there have been calls from some circles that these students required more training on processing multiple class of records, an earlier experience had made some archives inaccessible because processing was poorly done. These had to require reprocessing. Mazikana (1999) once observed that there is an increased attrition rate on trained professional and technocrats who are

leaving for what is perceived to be greener pastures. This poses serious challenges to archival institutions by frequently seeking resources so as to make sure that newly appointed staff gets required training.

The pre-2000 period has witnessed many librarians, archivists and records managers receiving training from abroad on bilateral international co-operations. Some archivists obtained higher degrees (Masters), short manpower development courses among other collaborative programmes. A drop in the number of archivists, librarians and records managers was noticed in the years that followed and this could be attributed to the declining economy a situation further compounded by Zimbabwe's frosty diplomatic relations with Britain and its allies. This resultantly implies that the quality of work to be done will be somehow challenged in comparison to international standards.

Access implications

Scholars in a variety of humanities and social science disciplines appreciate the meaning and role of archives in both the scholarly and political realms and ponder such questions as the role of archives in the formation of national consciousness and in the development of democratic and liberal citizenship (Manoff 2004). This explains why access to archives becomes a prerogative of every user. Most processed multi series records in the public archives do not cover period post 1970 (NAZ Public Archives Accessions Register). This means the period post 1970 to about 1989 constitutes backlog except for single series records.

Beaven (1999: 155) asserted that archivists would endanger the profession if they rely on theoretical debates to determine the scope and direction of the quest for professional standards for appraisal. The ordinary archival practitioner must engage actively in the intellectual debate to define a fully adequate appraisal methodology. This perspective brought about by Beaven (1999) is not only substantially correct in reference to appraisal but also true when it comes to acquisition in general, appraisal and processing priorities. Each archival institution must be guided by its clientele in determining processing priorities. This means that patterns of priorities are bound to change over time.

Decker (2013) says that archivists are responsible for suppressing accessibility of some information through their acquisition policies, weeding, processing priorities and general access policies. Historians of contemporary issues, social scientists and social commentators are mostly inconvenienced by the closure periods of public records which perceive as some form of embargoes. Due to different classifications assigned to records, they tend to have varying closure periods; this then becomes first step towards accumulating unprocessed records. Personal records which are generally given 50years closure period and adoption cases closed indefinitely are examples of records that users may be denied access despite the essence of their research topics. The nature of some records does not really need to wait for 25 years for them to be accessible to the public. For example, why should census returns or tsetse fly reports by the Veterinary services wait for 25 years to be made accessible for public use? To this end, classification of records must further be refined down to item level.

In 2008/2009 some records from the Central Statistical office had to be reprocessed because they were literally inaccessible due to poor processing at NAZ. This suits Cook`s (1977:99) definition of process backlog as the mass of material which has been processed and described inadequately or according to obsolete standards in the past. In 2014 a section of some records from the Federal archives was discovered to have been allocated wrong references, thereby demanding a revisit to it.

Conclusion

Causes of backlog and required remedies in archival institutions are an area that requires further research. It is topical and important because the effects of backlogs are double fold in the sense that it is costly for archival institutions and they deprive users' access to archives. The more the backlogs the more archival institutions render themselves ineffectiveness in being information resource centres for many users.

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