The past, present and future of records and archives management in sub-Saharan Africa

Cathrine T. Nengomasha

University of Namibia, Department of Information and Communication Studies, Namibia
cnengomasha@unam.na

Abstract

In this article, the author highlights some of the issues that have drawn the attention of records and archives management professionals in sub Saharan Africa. The article draws from the author's experiences as a practicing archivist, administrator and educator over a period of thirty years in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia. A look at the resolutions of the East and Southern African Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) conferences over the years, tell a story of a profession that is still grappling with the old challenges of managing records and archives. These include poor records storage, lack of records management policies or where they exist, a failure to implement the policies, failure to follow the basic procedures involved in managing records throughout their entire life cycle such as none existence of or failure to implement filing systems and retention schedules. Audit reports still paint a gloomy picture over the poor state of records and records keeping systems. These issues are repeated in almost every ESARBICA resolution document and reiterated by many studies as presented in research reports and publications. The article argues that some of these challenges seem to have persisted and have transcended time and space, from the past into the present and affect many of the sub Saharan Africa countries, albeit in varying degrees. If not put in check these issues will be carried over into the future. The author acknowledges the growth that the profession has experienced in terms of training and the impressive number of Diploma, Degree, Masters and PhD holders. It even boasts of a sizeable number of Professors. The question is: What can the professionals do to make their research and studies have more impact in solving these records keeping problems? This is a theoretical study based on some desk research which looked at ESARBICA resolutions as well as some reports on studies conducted on records and archives management in sub Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Records management; archives management; records and archives management training; research in records and archives management; ESARBICA; sub-Saharan Africa

1. Introduction

This article addresses the issues that have drawn the attention of records and archives management professionals in sub Saharan Africa over the years. These include the impact of the move from colonialism to independence on records and archives management and the persistent problems in records and archives management. The World Bank (2005) refers to countries emerging from the colonial period to statehood, doing so without adequate systems to keep the governments functioning because either no adequate record keeping systems were established or they were not maintained. The poor state of record keeping systems was also described by Cain, Piers, and Thurston (as cited in Ngulube & Tafor 2006:69) who state that "in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa existing paper record systems – the foundation for automation - are in a very poor state".

Several authors (Mazikana 1996; Mnjama 2003; Nengomasha 2009; Ngoepe 2008; Ngulube & Tafor 2006; Taylor 1994; The World Bank 2000) have written about problems that are faced by many post-colonial African countries regarding records and archives management. According to Mazikana (1996), these problems include malfunctioning or outdated registry systems; antique or inappropriate file classification; no training for staff; problems of missing files; inadequate records centre facilities; non-existent record appraisal and transfers; backlogs in archives processing; poor physical wellbeing of collections and equipment breakdowns. Mnjama (2003) highlights problems in Kenya's record-keeping processes, while Nengomasha (2009) and

Ngoepe (2008) report on collapses of record-keeping systems in South Africa and Namibia respectively. Taylor (1994) gives an overview of the records keeping situation in Namibia. She attributes the collapse of records management systems in post-colonial Namibia to:

> *…offices assuming different functions, being re-named, being closed, new offices being opened, which have resulted in many offices having no records management programme at all and each person doing his or her own thing. As new functions were created and some old ones closed, records were taken to the National Archives of Namibia without following proper procedures* (Taylor, 1994: 62).

Sub Saharan Africa is facing challenges of managing its records. Garaba (2013:76) states that "archives as resource centres are in a state of neglect, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa." An example of this is the sad picture painted by Lekoekoe (2012: 1) regarding the National Archives of Lesotho who states:

> *Lesotho is no exception in lack of clear understanding of the importance of the records. As a result, the national archival system is neglected and the necessary structures pertaining to the safety and preservation of this national asset are inexistent. There has been an outcry for decades now for the establishment of a record centre that plays a pivotal role in the life cycle of a record as it would be a home for semi-current records. This would curb the dumping of records in the dark rooms as at times this is owing to shortage of space in the registries.*

The 2009 ESARBICA Conference resolution on Lesotho states: "Taking note of the problem experienced by Lesotho in managing its archival heritage, this conference urges the National Archives of Lesotho to seek assistance from regional and international partners" (ESARBICA Conference 2009: 1). The resolution singling out Lesotho could be mistaken to mean that Lesotho Archives is the only archival institution facing problems. Other countries in Sub Saharan Africa such as Botswana (Ramokate & Moathlodi 2010), Namibia (Nengomasha 2009), Malawi, Swaziland and Uganda (Mnjama 2007a) also experience problems, maybe to a lesser degree than Lesotho's. Ramokate and Moathlodi (2010) discuss the problem of backlogs in appraisal at the Botswana National Archives and Records Services. They attribute the problem to "…poor classification of records, lack of retention and disposal schedules, lack of primary appraisal, unavailability of administrative history, low staffing levels, and lack of skills and experience". A review by Mnjama (2007), of the ESARBICA resolutions from 1965-2005 whilst acknowledging successes in some countries and institutions, reveal a failure to manage archives in general due to lack of trained staff, inadequate storage facilities and lack of resources.

The Lesotho resolution and the examples cited above relate specifically to archival institutions and archives management. However, as for records management, the problems seem to apply to a greater number of sub Saharan countries such as Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Tanzania just to name a few. Findings from studies conducted in these countries support this assertion. These are discussed in section two of this paper. Problems of managing records in ESARBICA have been summarised by Wamukoya and Mutula (2005:75) as follows:

- absence of organisational plans for managing e-records;
- low awareness of the role of records management in support of organisational efficiency and accountability;
- lack of stewardship and coordination in handling paper as well as electronic records;
- absence of legislation, policies and procedures to guide the management of both paper and electronic records;
- absence of core competencies in records and archives management;
- absence of budgets dedicated to records management;

- poor security and confidentiality controls
- lack of records retention and disposal policies; and
- absence of migration strategies for e-records.

A look at ESARBICA resolutions shows that some of these records management issues have been raised as concerns at several ESARBICA conferences (Mnjama 2007). However due to the persistence of the problems, a 2011 ESARBICA resolution encourages member states "…to develop records management toolkits and in so doing benchmark with other available toolkits developed by Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA), International Records Management Trust (IRMT) and others" (ESARBICA Conference 2011: 2). Mnjama (2007:27) alludes to the fact that ESARBICA resolutions have not been implemented when he states that "this is at least one area, where the resolutions passed by the general conference had produced tangible and meaningful results". The "one area" refers to the success of Zanzibar securing donor funding to rehabilitate its archives which Mnjama (2007) attributes to a resolution passed by one of the ESARBICA general conferences. ESARBICA could learn from the experiences of the Pacific Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA) which did not leave members countries to their own devices, bearing in mind their different capabilities. PARBICA went for cooperation and collaboration as "representatives from many Pacific countries worked together to develop a suite of web-based and printed tools which form the Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit" (Crookston 2011). The ESARBICA toolkit resolution leaves it to member states to more or less go it alone.

The author also takes note of the developments that have taken place in the education of records and archives management. According to Mnjama (2007a) there were no known trained archivists in the late sixties and early seventies. This applies to records managers as well. The profession has produced, in the last ten years, an impressive number of Masters and doctoral students as well as professors who have researched and continue to research on these challenges, coming up with very strong recommendations. Many professionals are engaged in consultancies in records and archives management world-wide. There has been a growing number of training institutions in records and archives management. There is also evidence of greater recognition of the value of records management in public administration and corporate governance as evidenced by records keeping requirements spelt out in some of the national policy documents, for example on e-government. There is no doubt that the profession has grown.

In this article the author focuses on the persistent problems, drawing from ESARBICA Conference resolutions over the years and research findings of studies conducted on records and archives management in a number of countries. Despite the growth in the records and archives management profession, the problems have persisted. What can the profession do differently to improve the situation so that future generations do not continue to lament over the same problems?

2.   Records management problems discussed in the literature

A number of studies have been conducted on records management in various sub-Saharan African countries. The conclusions drawn from these studies highlight that the problem of managing records continue to increase. This section of the article discusses some of these studies in a selected few countries.

2.1 Botswana

In Botswana, several studies on records and archives management conducted by researchers such as Chebani (2005), Keakopa (2006), Kenosi (2010) and Tshotlo and Mnjama (2010) reveal records keeping problems.

A study by Tsholo and Mnjama (2010) in the Gaborone City Council identified poor records keeping practices. They suggested that the regular loss and misplacement of records was partially due ineffective tools to monitor the movement of files within the organisation. The study revealed poor records storage conditions, pests in the registry, a lack of guidelines on records access, a lack of retention and disposal schedules; lack of policies and procedures to manage electronic records such as email and a shortage of trained and skilled manpower.

2.2 Kenya

Authors such as Mnjama 2007b; Nasieku, Kemoni and Otike 2011, have written on records management in Kenya. Mnjama (2007b) refers to frequent cases of lost or misplaced case files in the Kenyan courts system, which have impacted negatively on the administration of justice. He suggests that some of the cases relating to loss of files may be linked to corrupt practices. Mnjama (2007b) is of the opinion that efforts made by the Kenyan Government to address problems associated with loss or misplacement of court files have not done much to rectify the problem. Mnjama (2007b:9) cites Kenya's Chief Justice, as having reported a total of 500 missing files in one year alone. "The registry system at the courts was seen as inefficient, with common cases of missing files from the Companies Registry" (Mnjama 2007:9). The fact that this problem of poor records keeping is Kenya's public service is an old problem that continued is evidenced by the following:

> In April a 1999 circular issued by the Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet and Head of Public Service to all Permanent Secretaries, the Solicitor-General, and the Controller and Auditor-General on Cases of Missing and Lost Files and Documents in the Public Service and read in part: "Cases of missing and lost records are a common experience in public offices. This has been caused by laxity and poor records management practices in Government Ministries, Department and Parastatal Organisations. But in other cases, the incidence of missing and lost records is a direct result of corruption among a few public servants (Mnjama 2007:12).

Mnjama (2007b:14) recommends training "of those in charge of registries and those under them" as one of the ways to address the problem.

A study by Nasieku, Kemoni and Otike (2011) identified a lack of knowledge and skills in records management in general as contributing to poor records management at Moi University. Similarly one of this study's recommendations was training of records keeping staff.

2.3 Namibia

Several researchers (Barata, Bennett, Cain & Routledge 2001; Nengomasha & Beukes-Amiss 2002; Namibia Research Consultants 2002; Nengomasha & Nyanga 2012) have identified recurring problems in the management of records in the public service of Namibia. A study on the management of financial records in Namibia by Barata et al. (2001) revealed weaknesses in the systems' ability to manage financial records. "In a large number of offices there are no tracking systems in place to record the movement of records outside the creating or processing section" (Barata et al. 2001:6). Also emerging out of the study was the fact that records, which exist in mixed media environments, require strong controls to protect them against unauthorised access, alteration, copying and destruction. They concluded that accomplishing this in the Public

Service is very difficult, as "the records management function as a whole has no presence throughout government" (Barata et al. 2001:8).

A study on records management in the Public Service of Namibia by the Namibia Research Consultants (2002:23) observed the following:

Government registries are not functioning. They are manned by Grade 10 (an equivalent of three years of secondary school education) school leavers, too low for the competencies or skills required to effectively manage records. The resultant situation is that the action officers having very little regard for and confidence in those registry clerks, set up "their own ring binder system of storing paper documents in their offices or store information in their PCs, or assign their filing to private secretaries who have no training in this respect.

Nengomasha and Beukes-Amiss (2002) confirmed this state of affairs in a records survey in Namibia's Ministry of Health and Social Services. The survey observed a lack of a records management system, an absence of classification schemes, retention schedules and systematic disposal of records, resulting in heavy congestion of offices and poor retrieval of information.

Nengomasha and Nyanga (2012) report that a total of approximately 5744 linear metres of semi current records in 176 institutions in seven of Namibia's thirteen regions were kept in very poor conditions. They were dumped in store rooms with broken down equipment and furniture covered in a lot of dust. None of the 176 institutions had a retention and disposal schedule in place.

2.4 South Africa

A study in South Africa by Ngoepe (2012) identified poor records keeping as one of the contributing factors towards negative audit reports. "Many records management programmes had collapsed under their weight to the point where they did not function at all" (Ngoepe 2012:167). Marutha (2011) reports on poor records management in the public health sector of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. Some of the factors contributing to this include a lack of proper filing systems and a lack of trained and skilled staff. According to Chinyemba (2011), many of the South African Universities experience records keeping problems. Earlier studies (Marutha 2001, 2005; Ngoepe 2008) identified the same problems indicating that the problems have continued and in some cases grown worse.

2.5 Swaziland

Tsabedze (2004) describes poor records keeping systems in the public service of Swaziland based on his study of records management in selected Ministries in Swaziland. This state of affairs seem to have continued as reported by Maseko (2011) whose study reports poor records management in Swaziland Television Authority, due to the failure by the Swaziland National Archives, vested with the mandate to set and enforce standards for Records and Archives Management, to conduct records surveys, and fulfil its preservation, records and archives management responsibilities.

2.6 Tanzania

Records management underpins public service reform. Mazikana (2009) is of the opinion that most archival institutions with the mandate to provide a records management service to the public service lost an opportunity to push the records management agenda during public reform exercises. He cites Zimbabwe and Zambia as having missed the boat. On the other hand he cites Tanzania as having made records management one of the core components of the Public Service Reform Programme. The Records Management Project, a sub component of the Public Service Reform Programme was launched in 1997 (Manyambula, 2009). As this paper argues, even this

seems not to have had much impact as problems of managing records in the public service of Tanzania have continued. A study by Ndenje-Sichalwe (2011) revealed that although the introduction of the Public Sector Reform Programme (PSRP) had resulted in some efforts in reforming the records management practices in the public service, records in the government ministries were not well managed.

These and other studies before and after have come up with recommendations on how the situation can be improved. Records and archives management professionals should ask themselves whether leaving recommendations behind is having an impact or not. With all their educational knowledge and experience is that the best that they can do? Other professions have come up with voluntary associations or organisations, and spend time doing charitable work. What stops them from doing the same? Could this be something that can be inculcated into records managers of the future, and by future, meaning now. Can the profession come up with more projects such as the Gambia project?

3.   Records and archives management training

This article argues that the developments in records and archives management training in sub Saharan Africa have not done much to improve records keeping in the organisations, what Mazikana (2009: 48) refers to as "front end records management". According to Mnjama (2007a: 29) "it could be safely inferred that the aspect of training is being adequately addressed." If one looks at the number of training institutions that offer records and archives management training in sub Saharan Africa, there has definitely been a marked improvement. Although there is no empirical evidence on the number of professionals trained in Africa, it is this author's general observation that more and more professionals are being produced by African training institutions.

Institutions training professionals at different levels in Sub Saharan Africa include University of Botswana; Kenya Polytechnic, Sigalala Polytechnic; the School of Professional Studies in Nairobi; Moi University; Kenyatta University; School of Library, Archives and Documentation Studies, Bagamoyo; University of Zambia; National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe; several colleges and Universities in South Africa); the University of Namibia; Institute of Development Management (IDM); Makerere University in Uganda and Zimbabwe Open University. There has also been a mushrooming of companies offering short courses in records and archives management. This recent development, although it is an indication of the recognition on the importance of records management, needs the profession to be weary. Some of these are "fly by night" companies taking advantage of opportunities to make some quick money in a not so well regulated profession. The Government of Namibia has put in measures to control this disturbing occurrence, making it a rule that the National Archives of Namibia should approve all the training course that the public servants attend paid for by Government.

Despite all these developments in the training of records and archives management, the problems of records keeping persist. Why does training feature most amongst the recommendations by researchers? Are these graduates failing to make it into the industry? Are training institutions emphasizing too much on theory in the curricula? Mazikana (2009: 50) argues that "very few archival and records management schools prepare records managers for the front end of records management... most curricula focus on the management of semi-current records or on that point at which records are being off loaded from the records creating institutions to the records centres or the archival institutions". Whilst this could have been true at the time that Mazikana carried out his review, could this still be true for some training institutions in the present day. Pressure is being put on training institutions to make sure that

their curricula meet the needs of the industry (Nengomasha 2008). This author agrees with Mazikana who encourages professional practice or internships for students that curriculum should incorporate some experiential learning.

Mazikana (2009: 50) contends that "records managers and archivists are trying to do the impossible: to improve systems that they know little about and which they do not fully understand or appreciate". Could he be challenging the lecturers, professors and consultants to keep abreast with developments in "the front end of records management"?

4.   The future

What then is the future for records and archives management in terms of eradicating these problems which seem not to go away? This article recommends a few strategies. These require that professionals become more of doers than recommenders and pay more attention to what is going on in the registries and the archives. This might require taking time to engage with the practitioners in the registries and archives.

1. Outreach activities such as the Gambia project which brought together some Commonwealth professionals in Gambia in the early 1990s for a practical workshop to "restore order to the National Archives of Gambia" (International Records Management Trust, 2012), under the umbrella of the International Records Management Trust in collaboration with the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers (ACARM), can be replicated by present day professional bodies. The PARBICA toolkit example fosters collaboration and cooperation. Educational institutions are establishing consortia, information intensive organizations are developing coalitions, and information-based corporations are forming strategic partnerships. Why? Because they recognize that individually they cannot achieve as much as they can together (Burckel, 1996). The professional bodies can spearhead these collaborative projects. Rather than spending conference time in doors, it's time to think of "field work" conferences where conferences bring together professionals who may spend two days of a five day conference consulting where they are needed most – the registries and archival institutions.
2. A 2011 ESARBICA conference resolution called for "Promoting capacity building for young and upcoming archivists and records managers, focusing on research and development". How about channelling post-graduate students more into action research?
3. Training institutions should strengthen experiential learning. Due to a serious shortage of skilled and experienced manpower in the industry, sometimes students find themselves on attachment or professional practice with no one to mentor them in records and archives management tasks. They end up being assigned tasks which have nothing to do with the profession. The training institutions and host institutions need to work closely to find a solution to this problem. Employers of fresh graduates also need to be encouraged to send their employees to other institutions, within or outside the country for hands on experience. Just as a builder builds a house and the owner turns it into a home, employers of fresh graduates need to take the responsibility of turning these graduates into professionals.
4. Records and archives management professionals need to guard the profession and ensure that standards are met and quality training is provided. The profession can work towards coming up with some accreditation framework.

5.   Conclusion

Records management problems in sub Saharan Africa are well documented in the literature. The problems seem to continue unabated in most countries and institutions. Although there have been significant strides in the development of training institutions which have produced a sizeable number of professionals, several researchers still consider a lack of skills and training as a contributory factor. The profession needs to do a self-evaluation and come up with practical measures to break this "curse" of persistent poor records keeping. This should be the focus for the profession for the immediate future. The article has made a few suggestions which require the professional researchers to go beyond the recommendations on paper by engaging the organisations and records management practitioners in the implementation of those recommendations. Similarly training institutions need to maintain a balance between theory and practice.

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