Reflections on African archives: their role in meeting societal needs in the 21st century

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Abstract

Global recognition of the role played by records and archives towards major global initiatives such as Open Government Partnership is slowly beginning to emerge. This is illustrated by the inclusion of a whole session on governance and information integrity at the November 2013 OGP Summit in London. Judging by the presentations at this session, it was evident that records and archives remain among the key factors driving the openness, good governance, transparency and accountability agenda world-wide. It's in this context that this paper evaluates the contributions made by African archives towards meeting society's needs and expectations in the 21st century and further interrogates the changing role of African archival establishments during this period. The paper concludes by affirming the view that African archives have unique contributions to make towards the needs of society and hold the key to ensuring that official information generated by both governments and private businesses is protected and preserved in a trustworthy and usable manner.

Keywords: archives, open government partnership, good governance, accountability, digital records, Africa

Introduction

Recently, I attended a very successful summit in London on Open Government Partnership (Cabinet Office, UK 2013)[i] during which I presented a paper on openness and records and archives integrity [ii]. International recognition of the important role and contribution of archival science towards major global issues such as OGP is beginning to emerge. This is in spite of tendencies by records professionals to under-value and under-sell this noble profession.

Today, records and archival science is helping drive the openness, good governance, transparency and accountability agenda world-wide as amplified by the session on openness and records integrity at the London OGP Summit recently; this is clearly a paradigm shift that goes far beyond the traditional role of archives which focused more on culture and history. In Africa, the word "archives" has tended, sometimes, to conjure a rather negative image, with some people viewing archives no more than "torn, dusty worthless papers". Still, other people have tended to view archives as "old parchments, scrolls and leather-bound volumes of valueless materials that are hardly referenced by anyone".

This paper defines archives as "that small but significant portion of information, communication, ideas and opinions that people or organizations generate and which are recorded and preserved for current as well as future reference. They are tangible products that manifest themselves in physical, electronic, visual, aural or written form". In support of this definition, records can be defined as "information captured on some "fixed medium", in the form of either correspondence, electronic file such as an e-mail message, or cellulose acetate tape containing images in the form of a movie film, created and maintained as a record and as evidence of events or activities, or information to provide accountability for decisions or actions".

This paper will reflect on the societal role of archives so as to evaluate the contribution that African archives have made towards meeting society's needs and expectations. This precipitates the question "what are these societal needs?"

In the African context, the late Kenyan archivist and ESARBICA Secretary-General, R.J. Kukubo (1986)[iii] put it on record that the importance and value of records and archives was recognised in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi as early as the 1930's and 1940's. However, it was not until the 1950's and 1960's that African archives truly begun to receive much greater attention following independence from the former colonial masters, starting with Ghana in 1957 to the end of apartheid in South Africa. Since then most African Governments went on to commit substantial resources towards the care, preservation and accessibility of records and archives by their own citizens and citizens of the world at large.

Public officials have similarly used public records and archives to re-define national development priorities while private citizens have continued to utilise these vital resources and assets in pursuit of collective national aspirations or to demand individual and community rights. Scholars have used records and archives for historical research while some individuals have exploited them as sources to trace family histories and genealogies. It's therefore true to say that for the last fifty to sixty years, most sub-Saharan African countries have enjoyed "archival sovereignty". During this period, while a majority of African archival institutions including national archives have been able to fulfil the mission for which they were established, it is appropriate to examine the changing role of these establishments in the 21st century.

Africa's societal needs in the 21st century

While these institutions must continue to serve ~~our~~ cultural needs as custodians of the past, it's time to take stock of the changing needs of societies, ascertain their priorities and the interventions that records and archives can provide in shaping the future destiny of these societies. This consequently revives the subject of societal needs. In many parts of the continent today, people are crying for various freedoms away from bad governance to denial of personal rights and freedoms, political party dictatorships, civil oppression and repression, corruption, tribalism and clanism, ethnic cleansing, poverty, marginalisation and poor service delivery, among others. Thus, records and archives today, should in many ways, serve as an embodiment of daily human activities, but are they? With so much focus on official records, to what extent do the records and archives reflect the voices of ordinary citizens? Considering standardised archival legislations, are archivists doing enough to collect, preserve and make available private archives that document the voices of community and civil society groups? Have archivists done enough to document the exploits of the business and/or commercial sector, or the voices of the ordinary people through formal programmes that focus on oral history and oral traditions?

Secondly, archivists are challenged to come out of what has been described as their "dusty past" and embrace technology. Today's youthful generation is geared towards social media and other technologies. Is it therefore possible that archives as a profession can attract young talent while still being pre-occupied with old dusty files? Most Archival institutions are bastions of paper records and archives and most, if not all, are doing very badly with regard to electronic records and archives management and are unable to provide professional leadership or guidance in this area. The archival fraternity can make the profession attractive to more young people

by formulating programmes and strategies that provide internship opportunities, by revising and revamping academic programmes at our Universities and Colleges to entrench technology-oriented courses, skills and competencies, as well as strengthening and transforming professional archival associations into more vibrant change agents. Indeed, as noted by the Hon. Minister for Natural Resources and Energy in Swaziland some years ago, "no Messiah will come from any corner of the world to up-grade the status of the archives profession but yourselves".[iv]

Devolution of archival services

There is need to decentralize and/or devolve archival services by adopting a model that aims to bring these services closer to the people. We need to do this by confronting the barriers that militate against meeting the needs of local government and the people at regional and grass-root levels. Decentralization of archival services can only be considered meaningful if it seeks to give greater freedom, responsibility and autonomy to professionals and the people at local level. The new Constitution of Kenya 2010[v] provides for both a centralised and devolved governance system. Yet, as the devolution process gets underway, it's quite clear that neither the Central Government through the National Archives nor the Country Governments themselves have given thought to a decentralised archives system. In the absence of effective record keeping systems, these devolved local entities will not be in a position to effectively carry out their mandates and functions. Under these circumstances, it's most likely that these county or local governments will simply adopt record keeping models existing in central government, many of which have proved to be woefully inadequate.

Creation of adequate record keeping systems to support decentralization will require significant investment in terms of resources, infrastructure, legislation and policy and human capital. Such systems must eventually transform into local archives centres where local residents can go to learn about their history, culture, and where local researchers, community groups and businesses can deposit collections of records concerning local events and activities, similar to the British model of local or county archives.

In all African countries, both local government and central government administrative systems and structures have grown many times more, surpassing by far, the small central Secretariats that were left behind by the colonial administration at independence. This has significantly impacted on record keeping systems which have not kept pace with the growth and modernization of government. Dysfunctional record keeping systems undermine the ability of government and other agencies to formulate, implement and sustain effective policies and programmes, and are a hindrance to information access and use. Besides, poor record keeping systems cannot protect citizens' rights and fundamental freedoms as the South African History Archive (SAHA) has demonstrated since the passage of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) in 2000.[vi]

This century, the global community has particularly focused attention on pro-people programmes such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) and Open Government Partnership (OGP) which are geared to improving human livelihoods, promote governance reform, respect for human rights, poverty eradication and conflict resolution. This is illustrated by the many governance reform initiatives across Africa. These initiatives call for the pro-active support of information professionals and in particular archivists and records managers, the majority of whom are the gatekeepers of the most important policy and development information generated by government. These noble efforts aimed at nurturing democratic governance institutions and structures as part of Africa's

renaissance can be seriously frustrated by the failure to provide a sound foundation for managing both records and archives.

Preservation of digital records and archives

As mentioned earlier, electronic and/or digital records is one of the weakest areas in archival practice. As most organisations, in both the public and private sectors in Africa embrace new technologies in the conduct of their business processes, the stack reality of their frailty to manage this new format of records is evident. If digital records and archives are not properly managed, entire nations, organizations and institutions will have no memory and no evidence of whatever nature in a few years to come.

During a conference held in Canada towards the end of 2012[vii], UNESCO challenged the global community to come up with specific initiatives aimed at preserving digital records and archives of both government as well as those of other non-governmental cultural agencies and commercial enterprises. This will certainly be a daunting task for most African countries not only because the initiative is resource intensive but also because of the knowledge and skills gap in this area. Primary financing for this initiative must come from government and donors, local or international. However, it's upon the archival community in these countries to articulate this need to government.

As Dr. Thurston[viii] of the International Records Management Trust (IRMT) observes, ways must be found to address digital preservation of the records and archives heritage as a development priority. She notes as follows:

> International donor and lender support is often a crucial factor in influencing national development priorities and an essential source of funding, but at present, digital preservation is not even on the radar of the global development

community. Unless it becomes a high priority for development, the money to pay for digital preservation and the structures needed to support it won't be available.

Without doubt, Information Communication Technologies (ICT's) have risen to the top of the development agenda. These systems are generating records and archives which must be preserved in digital form. But often, most people including government officials tend to assume that business systems in place also known as workflows are sufficient to protect this information even though these systems were not designed to manage records or archives. The situation is often complicated by the absence of a legal framework, policies, standards, enabling technologies and expertise to ensure that digital records are captured, preserved, and can be retrieved and made available for use for as long as they are required.

Digitization is a priority issue for many governments as they seek to make records and archives widely accessible to citizens in the current e-government environment. However, archivists must begin to deal with the challenges of digital records which include fragility of digital media, obsolescence of hardware and software, easy manipulation of both digital content and metadata, etc. Unmanaged records and archives can be manipulated, deleted, fragmented or lost. Consequently, access to information (ATI) requests cannot be met promptly, government's ability to make decisions is impaired, and such records cannot satisfy the admissibility threshold in a court of law. Corruption or fraud cannot be proven and organizations cannot be protected against business risks.

The challenge of access to archives

The issue of access to state or government archives in Africa deserves attention. The prevalence of Freedom of Information laws

and/or Promotion of Access to Information laws promulgated in the last twenty or so years around the world epitomises problems and challenges that have continued to undermine access to official documentary evidence not just in Africa but worldwide.

It's on record that the first FOI law was passed by Norway in 1780s, then there was a long break before similar laws were promulgated in the United States of America in 1966 (revised by Congress in 1976), followed by other Western nations in quick succession. The 1976 U.S Amendment according to Professor Eastwood[ix] depicted a modern trend towards promotion of greater access to official records and archives. By promoting greater access to official record, the law further exemplified a new era of greater transparency, accountability and responsiveness of democratic institutions.[x] The logical question to ask is about the impact on African archives. How have African governments and archival institutions handled the whole question of access to official records and archives?

Given that most countries in Africa still maintain fairly conservative legal frameworks that have retained the 30 year rule on the statute books and their continued reluctance and evasiveness to the promulgation of FOI and PAIA legislations, access to official records and archives remains a complex puzzle, often dictated by what government thinks should be made available for public consumption and archival institutions that largely act on the whims of the state.

The author was privileged to have been involved in a number of initiatives in East, Southern and West Africa aimed at improving the state of records and archives management. Sadly, in a number of countries, huge volumes of unsorted records cluttered government offices with little help from the national archives. The question is, do such situations promote archival access? In some countries, provisions of archival

law notwithstanding, no effort has been made to appraise, transfer, or dispose of records either for permanent retention or destruction. This is as far as government is concerned, and the situation is probably worse in private organizations and businesses.

The unfortunate thing is that the situation has persisted since 1983, when UNESCO sent out a questionnaire asking all countries to indicate "obstacles to access of information from archives".[xi] The response from various developing countries in Africa blamed such obstacles on absence of premises, qualified staff and security classification of holdings". Thirty-Five years on, African Archival institutions continue to grapple with the same issues and challenges.

The author holds the view that government records and archives are the embodiment of the public interest, and by extension, guardians of the same. Records and archives are created and kept so that today's citizens and the general public as well as future generations are allowed to see how government operated (transparency), how it acted in particular situations (accountability), and, how well it realised or achieved its objectives (responsiveness). This is clearly elucidated by Professor Eastwood when he says that "all archival documents speak of their place and time, the actors who made them, the actions they took, the thoughts they had….all archivists know and believe this, and they recognise the enduring and fundamental probative or evidential value of archives".[xii]

Therefore, African Archivists must choose which side of history they want to be judged, either on the side of those who promote transparency, accountability and the public interest in general, or the side of those who protect records and archives as "arsenals of power", by interpreting access policies narrowly and selectively simply to limit access to the privileged few. They must demonstrate this by being in the vanguard of those who are for the full adoption and

implementation of FOI laws (which of course also encompass privacy legislation).

What are the next steps?

Archivists and records managers need to make their voices heard more pro-actively and must strive to move the profession to centre-stage of the development agenda. The Openness and Information Integrity initiative under the OGP is one such opportunity they can utilise. The Open Government Partnership is based on the idea that governments exist for the benefit of the people and that the people should have access to information about what their governments are doing on their behalf, as this will make them more transparent, responsive, accountable and effective. Archivists and records managers should seize this opportunity to raise the profile of the profession, both with governments and with citizens, by clearly making the case that records and archives are the basis for openness both within government and also for corporate agencies and businesses.

The next important step for archivists and records managers is to ensure that record keeping functional requirements are addressed in relation to ICT systems including those on Open Data and e-Government. They need to ensure these functionalities are integrated at the design stage whenever new ICT systems are implemented. This is the only way that organizations and institutions can guarantee the capture, maintenance and usability of records and archive resources beyond the lifetime of systems that created them.

Last but not least, the transparency and accountability movement has proved to be one of the fastest growing area of interest in recent times. It brings together a wide range of key players, among them philanthropic foundations, official aid agencies, and civil society networks, all with a common agenda, to promote openness on the part of governments, businesses, and other institutions for the benefit of the public. Partnering with these organizations would give archivists and records managers an opportunity to make their voices heard powerfully and clearly, that records are the bedrock of transparency and accountability initiatives.

Conclusion

African archives have a unique contribution to make towards the needs of society and hold the key to ensuring that official information generated by both governments and private businesses is protected and preserved in a trustworthy and usable manner. To play its rightful role, archivists are called upon to be more strategic, and to begin to move in new directions, by forming partnerships and collaborations not only within the larger information community but also with other stakeholders such as those responsible for Open Data and e-Government, Civil Society and others mentioned above. In other words, the archives community will need to go beyond their traditional role of providing regulation and guidance to one of leadership and advocacy.

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