FROM LIBRARIES TO COMMUNITY INFORMATION RESOURCE CENTRES (CIRCS)? RATIONALE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROVISION OF INFORMATION TO COMMUNITIES IN TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT
The failure of the public library model to cater for the increasing information needs of the Tanzanian communities necessitates an exploration for the alternative information delivery system/model that is likely to take on board even those of a larger rural-based Tanzanian community. This paper is therefore a critical examination of how the public library model in Tanzania has been operationalizing and its effectiveness in satisfying the information needs of the Tanzanian community. The basic argument is that given the 'alien' nature of library model, it is still not suitable to Tanzania's social and economic environment basing on the fact that because the majority of Tanzanian community is rural-based, the 'library model' was equally required to reorient its information services to where the majority of people live. While examining these issues, an alternative model capable of reorienting its information services to the majority of Tanzanians is also proposed.

AN OVERVIEW
Over the years now most developing countries specifically in Africa and Tanzania in particular have very much depended upon library facilities for the provision of vital and survival information to their urban and rural-based communities. In rural areas where such information facilities are not available rural-based school libraries have been taking over this task as community-school libraries, i.e. serving the information needs of both school children and the neighboring community. However, one observed factor has been that the concept of a *library* among both urban and rural Tanzanian

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communities has always been conceived as a foreign imposition upon the communities and that is why its success in serving the information needs of the former has equally been problematic. For example, Baregu (1972) and Mchombu (1987) had earlier on seriously questioned the same model as to whether it was the best viable strategy to provide access to survival and development information to communities although they proposed no viable alternative strategy.

The establishment of libraries in urban or rural areas of Africa took the top-down approach by those who thought they knew what communities wanted in terms of information needs and therefore resources that could fulfill those needs. For example in Tanzania some of the agencies that supported this establishment included UNESCO, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation. Consequently, the information resource content of foreign imposed libraries focused mainly on what the "foreigners" thought was needed rather than being a product of communities' social demand for information. It is for this reason that libraries within most African communities have remained "alien" un-integrated as part of community's social services. Tanzania's pattern of library development, like all East African countries has been heavily influenced by the British and American traditions. The most important account on the early development of libraries in East Africa was the Hockey Report of 1960. The Report not only produced a blue print for library development; but also drafted the Tanzania Library Services Board (TLS) Act of 1963 (Kaungamno and Ilomo, 1979:43) which was replaced by the TLS Board Act of 1975.

The basic questions to be addressed by this paper are firstly, whether given the socio-economic status quo and the ever-changing information management environment currently prevailing in Africa in general and specifically in Tanzania demand new models of information provision and access by both Tanzanian rural and urban-based communities? It is assumed by this paper that as a result of the minimal or complete failure of the existing *library model* in the provision of critical development information especially to the rural Tanzanian communities, time may be now ripe to begin thinking of alternative and innovative ways of information provision and access to such communities.

Alternatively, can the existing information environment resuscitate the library model or support any model to be proposed or both models co-exist so that they become effective in the provision of information to communities in Tanzania? Finally, what would be the implications of either of these models in terms of resources, training and staffing, infrastructure and the like?

INADEQUACIES OF THE 'LIBRARY MODEL' IN COMMUNITY INFORMATION PROVISION

Weaknesses of the 1975 Tanzania Public Library Services Act
While this Act can be considered as the formal institutional framework for the establishment and management of library facilities for the provision of information to all communities in the country, it is however beset with a number of shortcomings, which renders it ineffective in achieving some of its objectives and goals. To begin with, the library model adopted as the basis for developing public/community information services in Tanzania besides being a replica of the British model has failed to take on board the social and economic conditions of the majority of Tanzanian community from which their information needs arise. Tanzania's past experience and earlier attempts by the TLS with community information provision included the establishment of some rural libraries, provision of services to some schools, book box services in some few villages and mobile and public libraries in urban areas. As Nyerembe (1995:173) notes most of these services were developed lop-sidedly as they served a limited portion of the Tanzania's community and became non-sustainable in the long run. Currently, no formal community information delivery facility exists which tries to meet community's needs for information.

Related shortcomings of the TLS Act also include its conception of a 'library' and its functions in the traditional western style. As a consequence, the library model has failed to adapt itself to the local information environment and community information needs in Tanzania. The establishment of libraries in the country based upon western concepts and even the kind of information resources found in most of them reflect this bias at the expense of community information needs. Lamenting the irrelevance of the

foreign public library model operating in most of developing countries, Navalani (1990) asserts that:

> The traditional model of (public) libraries is mostly print media based in the developed countries. The Third world countries are mimicking this model, without analyzing the social cues of our environment. We are basing library services on the actual media use behaviour of the information rich, hardly giving a thought that pattern of use will vary by group based on differences in social norms. The result is that we cannot reach the non-adopters (illiterates) of the print media.

According to Devadason and Lingam (1996) the design of any effective information system depends on the extent to which the system's characteristics are in full correspondence with the situation of (and has involved) the user and on how much the potential user of the system is willing and able to make full use of the services provided by the information system. Consequently, involvement of the user accompanied with a careful identification, analysis and classification of the 'real' information needs of users including all potential and non-users as well, would have been a critical basis for the planning, implementation and operation of the library model Tanzania currently operates. The fact that this has been missed and no any continual research has ever been undertaken among Tanzania's communities, it is obvious that the efficiency and effectiveness of the library model and the information services being provided are very much wanting.

A Non-Resourced Act
For any well thought out and planned activity to be effectively implemented the adequate availability of required resources is critical. The failure of the library model to reach even the 30% of our communities specifically the rural areas where the country's economy depends has continuously been attributed to the non-availability of needed resources both physical and fiscal. However, it is argued here that this has never been a critical problem except that it has been the bad planning and implementation of the library model, which was equally conceived regardless of planning strategies of sustaining it in the future. Dependence on unreliable government subventions and occasional donor aid by the model to

implement its plans of developing information services throughout the country has equally been another flaw characterizing the model.

According to available evidence the dangers of depending on external aid as the library model is doing are many. External aid agencies can influence the formulation and implementation of information-provision innovations in different ways. For example Samoff (1991) observes that the relationship between the donor and the recipient are sometimes manipulative. For example, library policies in most African countries were determined by the donors. One important question to ask ourselves is whether this condition has now changed? If not then our optimism of effectively reaching a sizeable community as regards satisfying their information needs is equally very bleak. Alternative model(s) are thus needed that will not only involve those requiring information for development but also models that are likely to adapt themselves and fit in with the social and economic conditions and ability of the community to sustain those model(s).

The 'library model' and the current information environment

In proposing any alternative model of information provision in Tanzania one has to understand that most of Tanzanian communities are basically a rural based society in which over 70% of the population live in rural areas and hence agriculture is its main activity. Information resource contents currently available in most libraries be it rural or urban have in most cases negated this fact to the extent that their relevance to most communities has been questionable. In addition, and as noted by Mchombu (1987), one of the mistakes made in the operationalization of the library model has been the assumption that communities live in "an information/knowledge vacuum" and have no channels of accessing and sharing information which should be filled by the formal library. Alternatively, the same communities have either devised their own strategies that would provide the kind of information, which relates to their information needs and interests. Very good examples here are informal networks, group gatherings, the mushrooming of specialized information providing centres found in various organizations, institutions and even in some communities such as community-based and non-governmental community-based organizations (*CBOs and NGOs*). These are

increasingly becoming critical channels mostly used by communities in sharing survival information used to solve their daily practical problems.

A study conducted in Mbozi district among small dairy farmers for example indicated the relevance of these alternative facilities for community information and the irrelevance of the formal libraries. Dulle and Aina's (1997) findings were that in resolving their (rural community) information needs, it was found that attending extension meetings and extension worker visits were the most dependable information sources used by the majority of farmers. *The use of libraries as an Information source was very much uncommon to the majority of the respondents with the major reason being lack of such a service or non-availability of relevant information* (emphasis is ours). These alternative facilities i.e. tele-centres, cyber cafes, a plethora of various media of accessing information, and the specific mass of community base-information growing out of the communities' social and economic activities which is not available in our formal libraries are threats to the relevance and existence of the library model.

The implication of this is that the library model currently in operation has either failed to capture them as its potential customers because of the irrelevant information resources it contains. Another equally important observation on the library model has been that because of the ever-changing information environment implies that provision of and accessibility to information is no longer the domain of libraries alone. For example Nauta (1985:275) supports a similar argument that any effective library/information delivery system has to come to terms with the structure and environment in which it is used. He continues that any library or such system that no longer interacts with its environment is dead. Can the library model therefore transform itself to fit in the current environment and be competitive in the provision of information? Perhaps, the need for repealing the Library provision Act of 1975 is more urgent now as it has been done to the National Archives and the Records Disposal Acts of the 1965 and 1930 respectively, all of which have been failing to accommodate the requirements of the changing social, economic and political environments Tanzania has been experiencing as a result of liberalization.

Exclusion of community information stakeholders

Community involvement in any developmental activity is part of planning and thus critical if such an activity/initiative has to be successful and sustainable. For Community participation to be truly effective, it is necessary for the people to be involved in all stages of planning, design, implementation and evaluation. The very success of a project may sometimes depend on the degree of participation of the beneficiaries. Arguments in favour of community participation have been touted for long, and ultimately it means a readiness of both the government and the community to accept certain responsibilities and activities. It can also mean that the value of each group's contribution is seen, appreciated and used. The honest inclusion of a community as "partners" in decision-making makes for successful community participation in any endeavor.

Put it differently, this implies that the local community is vested with greater control, planning and management of the development process of a given activity. However, this approach has been constantly overlooked as a tool for effective development and management of development projects/processes. The would-be beneficiaries for centuries have been gradually sidelined in the process of decision-making, resulting in a situation where they have to "adopt" to the resultant consequences. This is equally true with the development of libraries in Tanzania. The absence of mechanisms that would have enabled increased involvement of the community in information services development is still another glaring shortcoming of the TLS Act. It is partly this drawback that has de-facilitated the institutionalization of libraries as part of the community's social fabric. Involvement of the community in any developmental activity ensures that collective decisions made are sound and all parties support them. It also increases community/stakeholders' ownership and institutionalization of the activity as part of the community's social environment. The planning, organization and management of libraries as provided in the TLS Act and subsequent implementation negated this fact, which in turn left the same *library model* alien to the community it was supposed to serve.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION RESOURCE ENTRES: A FEASIBLE ALTERNATIVE?

The crucial question to be asked here is whether community resource centres (CIRCs) are any different from the public library model in existence and whether the former are more likely to appeal to the community and provide the kind of information that is relevant to the needs of the community itself. According to Ochai (1995), community resource centres have their origin in the need for community to satisfy its information needs barely satisfied by then existing information provision facility. In other words CIRC is an alternative information service (to the existing one) which is basically established, managed and where possible funded by the community itself to provide survival information to solve daily practical problems resulting from the community's environment. For example, authors such as Karlsson and Berger (1992:17) and Stillwell (1991:19, 143) reflect a similar definition except that their cases have tried to come up with a generalized meaning of such a centre and some kind of information resources it may contain. They assert that:

> A resource centre is a place that helps individuals and groups to deal with specific problems. It may store books and tools that people can borrow. It may produce or distribute material that people need for their work. And it may offer training and advice.

Basing of the above general definition then a community information resource centre is therefore a specialized kind of agency which assists individuals (and groups) with daily problem solving and which concentrates on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance. It is primarily geared to the development of the community with particular emphasis on community education. The objective of the centre should be to facilitate community empowerment, social change and transformation through information dissemination, production, skills and resource sharing. The key concept here is community education, which can be seen as an effort to educate the community, which will result in the general fulfillment of the standards of education of the community as a whole. As Lategan (1989:1-2) notes, community education is characterized by its

deliberate association with the overall development of the community.

JUSTIFICATION FOR CIRCs TO COMMUNITY INFORMATION NEEDS

While the above definition seems to imply that the objectives and functions of CIRCs do not differ much from those of formal libraries, distinguishing features are based on the following aspects:

1. Community resource centres arise from the community's needs for an alternative information service
2. They normally provide specialized information that aims at solving problems/needs arising out of the community's local environment
3. They integrate and use the community's traditional information sharing networks to any other formal/informal channels of disseminating information
4. They are planned, managed, operated and sometimes owned by the community itself through community involvement and participation at all levels as part of the community 's social services i.e. collective institutionalization.
5. The nature and sources of information in such centres may include recorded/non-recorded or members of the community as information sources.
6. Also and as Mchombu (1991): 27) notes in Tanzania, a country with 23 *(census of 2002 indicated 34.6)* million people, it was found that the number of public library users was between one to two percent of the population. This low percentage of use is accounted for by a library system characterized by poor library facilities in primary schools, secondary schools and most tertiary colleges. The public library model itself has been directing all its services to urban centres and avoided the rural dwellers who make up 80 % of the country's population.

It is by basing on these requirements/aspects which involve the community that CIRCs can fairly be accepted as a relevant alternative strategy for community information provision instead of formal libraries. Alemna (1996:40) is perhaps more specific as to

why CIRCs are more rationally relevant to community than formal libraries as regards the former's purpose. He contends that the rationale for CIRCs lies in their essentially different sense of social purpose. They differ from traditional libraries in that they are proactive in their sense of social purpose. Given that it is the social environment in which communities live and function that determines the kind of information and interests needed, CIRCs can therefore appeal to their needs because they arise out of same social environment different from formal libraries. In addition, due to community's input, adequate involvement and participation may facilitate the sustainability of these CIRCs.

IMPLICATIONS OF CIRCs AS ALTERNATIVE TO INFORMATION PROVISION IN TANZANIA

Community Needs and Interests Assessment

The fact that the formal library in Tanzania has had very limited impact in terms serving the information needs of the community reflects the need for having a thorough understanding of the society and its pertinent needs in the development of community information resource centres. As discussed before, the formal library model failed to take cognizance of what the community really wanted instead the protagonists of the library model assumed what they thought could be needed by the community and this had a negative impact on model's relevance. Adapting the alternative model being proposed in this paper should take caution of this mistake and involve the community in every planning aspect of CIRCs. There is accumulating evidence that the most successful development initiatives or undertakings are those in which the community is involved in their design and implementation. The same applies to information services for the community. To be effective, these have to be planned and executed at community level in order to enable the community and other stakeholders, not only pool and invest their energies and resources together in sustaining the information services but also, in ensuring that the same services match the information needs and interests of the community itself.

In Tanzania for example, it is argued that the decline and marginal effects of adult literacy programmes and rural libraries as

potential information delivery strategies in most of the rural (and urban) areas has mainly been to the fact that the literacy programmes were developed and implemented from above (Mushi, 1999:125). Consequently, the conditions under which such programmes should have operated were generally unknown and secondly, they tended to conflict with community's needs and interests. The community should therefore be involved as active partners in the process, which would enable it, contribute its own local information to the contents of CIRCs based on what they know is useful and relevant to their needs and interests. One tends to agree with Nyerere (1968:274) when he contends that:

> ...Tanzanian citizen must encourage the development of an inquiring mind; an ability to learn from what others do, and reject or adapt it to his own needs; and a basic confidence in his own position as a free and equal member of society...

This clearly implies that the community should have a say and an opportunity to determine its own information needs and interests. This is still a challenge that will need to be dealt with in the operationalization of the CIRCs as an alternative model of community information provision in Tanzania.

Retraining and re-orientation of the Human resource
Another equally important implication to be considered is that in the management of such a critical information delivery system for Tanzania, it is crucial to have trained, qualified and pro-active individuals who can effectively operationalize the CIRC model. The library model had most of its failure resulting from poor approaches in the planning and solving management related problems. The current training of information professionals manned by the Tanzania Library Services Board and the University of Dar-Es-Salaam which in the main concentrate on the library model, needs to be re-oriented and transformed into the kind of training that is holistic, but concentrating on the management of information and knowledge with the intended users in mind. Training of such professionals can be both formal and informal in-service training. It is this kind of training that would be relevant and capable of accommodating the management of alternative information delivery model like the CIRCs. In essence, graduates

from information science training schools must be concerned and conversant with socio-psychological and sociological problems of their community, community information seeking behaviour patterns and information communication networks preferred and acceptable by the community.

Resource Planning and sustainability

The issue of planning, specifically resource planning and availability is also crucial in the management of the alternative model. The little impact of the library model in ensuring that information delivery affects a large part of Tanzanian community can partly be attributed to the inadequacy of resources and largely to the model's dependence on government subventions and non-reliable donor handouts. Since local institutions like CIRCs normally grow out of the community's basic social, cultural and economic exigencies, the possibility of involving the community itself in sustaining the service is much higher. Currently in Tanzania local government organs, which are charged with responsibility of establishing, erecting, and maintaining social, or welfare services can equally be responsible for the maintenance of the proposed model of community information delivery from village, ward to district levels. This is necessary because local governments collect levy and tax from the community in order to establish and maintain community public services, like CIRCs. Another hope is the involvement of community-based, non-governmental organizations and currently farmers' cooperatives like those operating in Mbeya region. These are primarily more concerned with developmental condition and issues affecting the community at the grassroot level. Moreover many of these have the resources, tools and the know-how and can therefore reach the community even at village level.

Continuous monitoring and assessment of the system

For any system to remain effectively functional and productive it requires constant monitoring and evaluation to determine the level of its operation and the impact being generated as a result. Similarly, the proposed alternative information delivery model requires constant and systematic monitoring and evaluation to determine the extent of its success in the delivery/dissemination of

community information. This is critical since community's information needs, interests, and aspirations are always not static because of the demands and requirements evolving from the community's social milieu and the physical environment.

CONCLUSION

A retreat to understanding the local problems of the majority of the Tanzania community and re-orienting critical social services required for their development for example, information delivery, to where they are found remains the only relevant approach information professionals should adopt. The transferring of any foreign methods wholesale and imposing it on a different socio-cultural and economic environment as in the case of the public library model is likely to prove a disaster. Assessment of the community's environment, their needs and their involvement in the planning of any social service intended for them are therefore critical attributes in the planning of an effective and sustainable information delivery mechanism. This paper has tried to highlight the inadequacies of the library model approach to community information provision. Its basic argument has been that community involvement in any development activity is a critical and crucial part of planning if an activity has to succeed and become sustainable. Implications of the community information resource centres as an alternative to the formal library system such as needs assessment, resource planning, and continuous monitoring, assessment and marketing are emphasized. Finally it is equally emphasized that relationship with other community-based organizations and other sectors affecting the community is the key to effective collaboration and success for effective community information services.

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