

POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN UGANDA: THE CASE FOR A VIABLE OPTIMUM CURRICULUM TO PRODUCE POVERTY ALLEVIATION ORIENTED INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

Poverty alleviation is a long and painstaking process. It involves knowing what poverty is, its causes and means of alleviating it. Poverty is one of the scourges including disease and ignorance a combination of which deprives humanity of the basic needs for living. Among the strategies to alleviate poverty is effective processing and disseminating of information. There is therefore need for a corps of information professionals qualified and experienced on the information transfer process. These should be the products of a viable optimum curriculum. The paper defines poverty and its causes. Information is also defined and the relationship between poverty alleviation and information dissemination is stated. A viable LIS curriculum a vanguard of knowledge, competencies and skills is explained. Besides, such curriculum should be indigenised in the context of culture, language and literacy practices of the country concerned. Basing on the findings of the study entitled "A Library and Information Curriculum for Uganda with Special Reference to EASLIS, Makerere University: A Study of Influence and Processes in Curriculum Development" compared with curricula of the Departments of Library and Information Studies of the University of Aberystwyth, (Wales) Botswana and Cape Town, issues of the viable and indigenised curriculum are discussed. Finally strategies for the future are proposed.

Introduction

On first impression the paper looks far-fetched in the context of poverty alleviation. At a closer look however the relevance is obvious because in this era of information society, information is critical and could make a difference between development and backwardness, richness and poverty, success or failure. In the context of this paper, information is a raw resource and pre-requisite for development. Poverty is explained as Deprivation of basic necessities required by one to cope up with living. According to one

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source the number of people living in abject poverty in Uganda has shot from 7.2 to 9 million of the estimated Uganda population of 22 millions. The Monitor (Wednesday October, 2003).

Processing and disseminating poverty alleviation relevant information to the people in Uganda still leaves much to be desired. Apart from the unavailability of adequate and relevant information materials written in indigenous languages and at appropriate level, there are other constraints including abject poverty making it impossible for most people to buy information materials, illiteracy making utilisation of even the available few materials impossible. There is also lack of LIS infrastructure conducive to information transfer. However, the biggest problem appears to be lack of adequate, well trained and experienced information professionals committed enough to forego urban and town attraction and work in the rural areas where the illiterates toil for a living and getting money to send their siblings to school. Many of our rural and urban folks are poor because, among other reasons, they lack accurate, timely and relevant information. There is now an urgent need for a rural oriented information worker who could disseminate through alternative methods such as posters, talks, films, music, dance and drama, useful information necessary for economic empowerment and hence alleviation of poverty. This calls for a viable optimum LIS curriculum, which would give theory, skills, and competencies applicable in the rural setting.

The purpose of this article is to show the relationship between poverty alleviation, processing and dissemination of information and the need for a viable optimum curriculum that is a prerequisite to producing appropriate information professionals. It also discusses practices related to indiginisation of LIS curricula that have been undertaken outside Uganda by similar LIS education and training institutions in U.K and Southern Africa. Furthermore, it puts in perspective the findings of the study in areas of LIS curriculum in order to impact on poverty alleviation. Finally, it makes proposals for the future.

The study is based on a comparative evaluative study, carried out during the period 1998 -2001, of the East African School of Library and Information Science (EASLIS) curricula of professional programmes with those of the Department of Library and Information Studies of the Universities of Aberystwyth in Wales, Botswana in Botswana, and Cape Town in South Africa with a view of proposing a viable optimum curriculum for EASLIS. Viable optimum curriculum refers to the appropriate programme of study developed and implemented bearing in mind the needs of the stakeholders, the competencies demanded in the market place, methods of delivering these competencies and the need for establishing whether the programmes have the capacity to address the ever changing LIS scenario by producing competency-based information professionals. The process of designing an

optimum curriculum entails knowledge of the stakeholders' needs, identification of the competencies required in the market place (which itself requires knowledge of the competitors vying for the same competencies), and the creation, implementation and evaluation of programmes to teach and maintain the competencies. It also demands a realization that the information and library fields are in a fluid state – constantly changing and calling for updating of the competencies, if not acquiring new ones altogether.

Methodology

A qualitative paradigm was applied. There was no hypothesis to prove or reject. Research questions were applied and therefore the methodology was greatly influenced by grounded theory - "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research... where the theory formation evolves rather than being the initial force behind the research" (Weingand, 1993:21). The research took a heuristic inquiry approach which is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experience and insight of the researcher, and that of others who experience the same phenomenon (curriculum) (Patton, 1990:71). The population involved stakeholders in the education and training of information professionals including employers, policy makers, students, academic staff, users and rural opinion leaders. They were purposefully selected because they were thought to have high stake in the curriculum process and poverty alleviation and therefore expected to be information reach cases. The minimum sample was basically the recommended focus group of five to nine people. Triangulation was applied. Triangulation means making use of a combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon. Triangulation was necessary in this research because no single method would adequately address all aspects of the LIS curriculum and because each method used revealed different aspects of empirical reality. Furthermore, triangulation was particularly important in crosschecking the genuineness or validity of data. The choice of data collection methods was based on reliability of respondents, affordability and convenience in geographic scope, financial, and conceptual terms. The methods of data collection applied included content analysis- a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1952:18); the questionnaires which was the major data gathering method; the retreat which involved focused discussions by the SLIS staff and major stakeholders; investigation of the feelings of the M. Sc. (Inf. Sc.) students; brainstorming session on EASLIS Strategic Plans for 2000-2005; and the debate on "The EASLIS Curriculum is Ideal" which was a thought provoking debate to solicit views on the EASLIS curricula and related issues.

Review of literature Information

There is a growing realization among people in East Africa and worldwide that information is one of the keys to poverty alleviation. What is information?

Trying to define or describe the nature of information and differentiate it from related concepts of data and knowledge is a very difficult task, and no two commentators agree in every respect - there are many hundreds of definitions of information (Stoker, 1999).

Information has been conceptualized, defined and explained in many ways.

Evans (1987:5) referred to information as:

Recognition of patterns in the flow of matter and energy reaching an individual or organization. All flows of matter and energy have the capability of carrying patterned signals. Only when pattern is recognized is there information.

Mason (1990:2-5) referred to information as an "epistemic entity" because it changes one's state of knowledge. This epistemic entity is one of the four stages in a hierarchy: data, information, knowledge and wisdom. Data contain symbols and represent observations about ideas and things. Information is data interpreted in some context so as to give meaning. On the other hand, knowledge is information that has been verified in some sense and can serve as a source of human action. Finally, wisdom is the ability to judge data, information and knowledge and to select just those units that are relevant to the situation at hand. Information is therefore a fundamental component in the "epistemic process". Information is also an "economic resource". Many governments consider information as a commodity worth placing tariffs and controls upon, particularly in the electronic age. This is because it is viewed firstly as a source of income and secondly as a means to offset the spiraling costs of acquiring hardware/software and airtime. In this context, information is regarded as a commercial service or product. But unlike other commodities, information has unique characteristics: it is still shareable even when it is sold; it is neither scarce nor depletable; it has the qualities of transportability, intangibility, compressibility and expandability, storability in a variety of forms and formats, and manipulability; and it has no geographical barriers.

Information is not an end in itself; it is a means to knowledge and a prerequisite for development. Information is to development what oxygen is to life. Although the intermediary role of the information professionals (IP) is

declining because it is now possible users to access or retrieve information directly, the relationship of information to the curriculum remains central. The curriculum must give to the Information Professionals (IPs) those competencies, skills and experiences that will enable them to access, and process information quickly either on behalf of the users or alternatively to advise users how they can meet their varying developmental, social, economic or political information needs. The curriculum must have an in-built mechanism of adjusting to change to enable the IP to adapt to new competencies.

Furthermore, the explosion of information materials and the technology of processing the materials have overwhelmed the user who cannot probably optimally utilise the information without expert assistance. Economic, social, and political changes have spilled into and made impact on LIS education and training fields. These developments have thrown open to the public the hitherto monopolized processing and disseminating of information by librarians/information specialists. The market has therefore become more competitive. Apart from acquiring the expertise of information management, graduates from these programmes are expected to influence those who do not yet know of the indispensability of information to poverty alleviation. Above all, since considerable funding is required, LIS professionals should be taught communication, marketing, and public relations skills on these programmes necessary to win more funding for LIS development including education and training. There is need therefore for a corps of educated and trained information professionals with appropriate competencies and skills to acquire, process and access the information materials or extract information from them for the users. It follows therefore that the present curriculum has to be examined and reviewed to cater for the new demands of society. The case studies have regularly reviewed their curriculum and produced revised or new programmes altogether. The present study reviewed the developments at the case studies in order to learn from their experience and consequently establish a viable optimum curriculum for EASLIS that would cater for the changing LIS market particularly in the context of rampant poverty in East Africa.

Information Dissemination and Poverty Alleviation

Information has to be consumed and internalized in order to become knowledge. Knowledge is the basis of development. One of the goals for development should be poverty alleviation. Therefore information must not only be acquired, processed, stored and retrieved but must be disseminated. The basis of effective information dissemination is the establishing of information needs so that appropriate information is accessed to those who need it. A recent study established some basic information needs of Ugandans, to include information on development, disease and their control,

HIV, poverty alleviation, agriculture, religion, games and sports, current affairs, government, leisure, trade, commerce, industry and information skills. The same study identified alternative mode of information dissemination: oral information, drama, dance, music, posters/charts, FM Radios, television, films and video. (Kigongo-Bukenya 2001:436).

The causes of poverty in Uganda are categorized into external factors (insecurity, inadequate provision of social services, lack of commitment and political will, and the heavy debt burden) and internal factors (diminishing acreage of utilized land, illiteracy and drunkenness) It is further stated that the poverty alleviation impinges on the performance of those sectors where the majority of the poor are economically active. In Uganda the majority of the poor are engaged in the agricultural sector in general and the food crop sub-sector in particular. (Republic of Uganda, 1998: 202-205). These are the areas where information provision should be focused if poverty were to be alleviated. The message here is sound and clear: poverty alleviation could be achieved through availing relevant and timely information to Ugandans.

Curriculum Indiginisation and Poverty Alleviation

Among the objectives of the study was the establishment of the extent and level of indiginisation of the LIS curriculum at EASLIS and the case studies. Indiginisation is important in the context of poverty alleviation in EA because the concept does not eclipse globalisation but argues that curricula content should be attuned to local needs with the view of producing information professionals, knowledgeable of the indigenous languages and culture and with supportive attitude to the illiterate in the rural areas where the majority live. These are the backbone of the agricultural economy, which contributes about 80% of the GDP of Uganda. It is in these rural areas where the scourges: disease, ignorance and illiteracy - big contributors to poverty - are found. The need for information dissemination in these areas is therefore not only a necessity, but an urgent one .

Indiginisation in the context of this paper means “the need of making what is taught in library and information education institutions relevant to the needs of society so as to achieve meaningful and practical development” (Mohammed & Otim, 1978).

The concern about indiginisation was mooted at the Ibadan Seminar in 1953 and revisited by the Enugu Seminar in 1962, which stipulated that indigenous curricula should place the emphasis on local needs. These would include the issue of widespread illiteracy, killer diseases and abject poverty, particularly in rural areas, and the cultural aspects of countries. The Standing Conference of African Library Schools (SCOALS) in Dakar in 1975, sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), was a turning point. It deliberated and recognized the importance of the indiginisation of the Library and Information Science

(LIS) curriculum and recommended that courses such as African history, sociology, literature, oral tradition, audiovisual materials and technology be taught.

Benge & Olden (1981: 218) state that the challenge of indiginisation lies in the need to reshape all subjects and modify the approach to them in the light of local, national and library needs. Indiginisation involves deliberate efforts to ensure that (IPs) are taught relevant knowledge and trained in the appropriate skills and competencies. They need to have a wide consultation with stakeholders in order to establish the demography of users; to identify their information needs and information literacy levels; to study the state of LIS infrastructure and facilities, as well as the best methods for accessing information services.

A recent study put indiginisation in the context of a LIS curriculum

The indiginisation of an LIS curriculum calls for recognition of and respect for culture and, as such, the education and competencies of IPs must reflect the community's cultural affinities. Another issue the LIS curriculum has to consider is the attitude of the IPs towards rural areas. There have been complaints that the IPs despise rural areas and do not want to work there. Yet these are the places exposed to disease, illiteracy and abject poverty and they are the backbone of a developing country's economy and therefore need information most. (Kigongo-Bukenya, 2002: 38)

Nassimbeni et al. (1993) recommend that while curricula should retain international core subjects, they must differ substantially in other respects from the previously applied Anglo-American model. Indigenous areas needing special attention are the following: recognition and fostering of the oral tradition in communities, needs of rural communities for access to information, literacy training skills, popularizing and making accessible information resources, location, history, culture, socio-economic and political issues, understanding the importance of a national information policy, training in the use, and even the manufacture, of media for information access, knowledge and understanding of computers and similar technology in information work, particularly what has been called "developing information science", the adaptation of First World Information Science and Technology to the needs of developing communities

Findings of the study

The study came out with several findings including programmes content, teaching methods, mode of programme delivery, Continuing Education (CE), Distance Education, Programme Quality Control, Workforce Surveys and Tracer Studies, facilities, and Academic Staff. This article focuses on

findings directly concerned with indiginisation and therefore to poverty alleviation.

➤ **Student Illiteracy in Indigenous Languages**

A disturbing finding at EASLIS, which could be true of many of the LIS education institutions in the EA region, is that many students are illiterate in their vernacular languages despite being fluent in foreign languages. In fact there is a tendency of the educated despising indigenous language referring to them as primitive. This is made worse by foreign languages being the medium of education. However, the study established that the Department of Information and Library Studies (DILS) in Aberystwyth in the heart of Wales accommodates courses such as Local History in Wales: Sources and Services, History of the Welsh Book Trade, and Schools and Learning Resources in Wales; teaches courses in Welsh; and allows students to submit their course work in the Welsh language. In this way the graduates continue learning and using their vernacular language throughout the University; their attitude towards culture and language is modeled to local needs and, at the same time, they learn competencies and skills for serving the local population. The DILS at the University of Cape Town also encourages students to pursue research writing centered on information needs and communication patterns typical of African communities in the broadest sense. For example, the Information in Society Course includes a project dealing with the African initiative and the relationship between Africa and African countries and the global information society. Can LIS education institutions in this region, which have not already done so, learn from these approaches?

➤ **Academic Staff Illiteracy in Indigenous Language**

Furthermore, the study established that in Uganda, where five major indigenous languages are spoken – not mentioning the different dialects – academic staff are illiterate in other languages within the same national boundary. In such a situation, foreign languages such as English and French are the official languages. This creates further complications because these are minority, foreign languages functionally used by the minority elite, yet most official communication takes place in them. There is therefore a detrimental communication gap between the elite and the neglected majority who are illiterate.

➤ **Attitude to Rural Areas**

Another finding relates to the attitude of academic lecturers to the rural areas. It is not far-fetched to refer to me personally as a “rural stranger”, in the sense that I do not live and work in a rural area, and probably would not like

to do so either. This could be true of many of the academic staff at the LIS education institutions in this region. Many of us despise our local culture. For example, we regard the use of local drums during worship in churches with disdain but embrace the use of piano, accordion or guitar. Above all, we detest working in the rural areas and limit visits to the villages to celebrations or funerals, because they fear deprivation of the amenities of the urban areas. It appears to be the beginning of a vicious circle: the academic staff's attitude is wrong and probably begets students' unfavourable attitude to indigenisation.

➤ **Paucity of Reading Materials**

Another finding is the paucity of teaching and reading materials in the vernacular languages. Indigenous authors are no longer the problem; rather the problem is the large number of languages, which makes it unprofitable to produce and publish materials in the local languages because of the fragmented and limited market. Rural people, who in many cases can read only their vernacular languages, consequently have nothing to read and inevitably relapse into illiteracy.

➤ **Non-Participation of Rural People in Research**

The study also established that researchers do not effectively seek input from rural-based communities. The result is armchair deduction of information needs and the means of delivering information services to meet these needs.

➤ **Abject Poverty**

Abject poverty is another obstacle. Many rural people are poor and can hardly afford buying a newspaper or a radio save alone the batteries. The situation is aggravated by a lack of community centres or public libraries where information services could be offered to the communities for free or at a subsidized rate.

➤ **Lukewarm Government Concern**

However, the major setback in the endless list of problems facing indigenisation of LIS curricula is the lukewarm concern by the government about library and information development. Consequently, lip-service provision of LIS is given. There is no adequate funding to develop the basic electricity, telephone and telecommunications infrastructures and related aspects of LIS provision. This blocks the alternative ways in which information can reach the rural areas.

The way Forward

Access to and use of information are basic human rights. It is important that all inhabitants of the region have access and freedom to use information for

development. In this era of information society, the premium put on information is high because the success or failure of individuals and nations certainly depends on it. However, laymen cannot manage the current explosion and complexity of information, hence the need for well-educated and trained experts – the information professionals. Information professionals of a high quality will be a product of a dynamic LIS curriculum accommodating both indigenous and global dimensions. It will be a real battle to mobilize and consolidate efforts to achieve universalism in information through indigenisation. Neither individuals nor single nations can win this battle by themselves. There must be a partnership between all parties involved at global, regional, national, local and individual levels.

At global, national and local levels, LIS departments and schools must produce a curriculum that accommodates indigenous learning experiences. The process of designing such a curriculum will depend on a dynamic policy specifying regular review of, and involvement by stakeholders. The content of the curriculum must aim at producing information professionals with competencies and skills appropriate for the indigenous information transfer process for poverty alleviation. Academic staff that understand the concept and are sympathetic and knowledgeable about indigenisation in the context of poverty should teach such content.

At national level, there is a need for an “information-aware government”, which should put a liberal information policy in place; support the making of facilitative legislation; be signatory, to and implement international protocols, conventions and laws; support the information profession leadership; release adequate funding for information services development; and develop power, communication and telecommunications infrastructure for national and global communication.

Poverty and its associated non-development calamities could be explained in terms of lack of utility and timely information made available to those disadvantaged illiterates in urban and rural areas who badly need information in order to survive. The cocoon of poverty has to be burst in these grossly information deprived areas. The solution appears to lie in a LIS curriculum appropriate and flexible to afford the IPs knowledge and skills necessary to spearhead and win the war against poverty. The struggle may take some time but it is very noble cause, very difficult but not impossible to achieve.

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