

## **Role of libraries, information centres and archives in poverty reduction**

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### **Abstract**

*Information and knowledge are increasingly being recognised as effective means towards poverty alleviation, especially in developing countries. The available literatures show that traditional methods used to focus on addressing the problem from the outside. One of the approaches to reducing poverty is the appreciation of the poor people's potential in reducing poverty through searching for and using appropriate information and knowledge. This approach could lead to the identification of different categories of the poor and address problems each category was facing accordingly. This article presents the opinions of the poor people who took part in a study on how they use information and knowledge to reduce poverty. The insistence on the poor accessing and using information and knowledge for poverty reduction is motivated by the fact that change should start with the conscious individual then to society. However, to deal with this relentless social scourge a truly joint effort is needed including governmental effort.*

**Keywords:** Poverty reduction, knowledge management, information sharing

### **1. Introduction**

Transformation of information and knowledge into a relevant tool in poverty reduction intervention presupposes the availability of individual motivation, interest and effort that encourages the targeted group's ownership of the relevant knowledge (Steele, 2008; Talisayon & Suministrado, 2008; Mchombu & Mchombu, 2014). The role of information and knowledge in poverty reduction is perhaps the most significant and troubling issue in poverty reduction efforts. The ability of the poor in dealing with this problem by searching for and using quality information and knowledge is important. In fact, barriers to accumulating, accessing resources and accessing information contribute to the continuation of poverty. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily suggest a watertight causal connection between information and knowledge, on the one hand, and poverty reduction, on the other. At best, it

suggests an interaction between these variables. A multitude of other factors for example, policy instruments influence this relationship.

The researcher in this study explored the views of the poor because of the conviction that they knew that they were poor because they were experts in poverty; they had useful and productive knowledge and were motivated and determined to pull out of this mire by any means. They could explain, theorise, discover, identify suitable development projects, determine a receptively productive knowledge and how to disseminate it, elect their dynamic leadership and identify any bottleneck to their endeavour to change. In fact, for effective poverty reduction to take place it is necessary to improve personal capacities and to facilitate access to information and knowledge that can lead to change. Nevertheless, the poor people differ from one another in terms of levels of poverty. There are extreme, moderate and progressive poor people. Some of the poor people, for example, those in extreme poverty, are harder to reach and they require stronger and longer-term support as they have a limited political influence (Institute of Development Studies, 2014) and they are less willing to accept change. This article reports on findings of a study that focused on the moderate and progressive poor because they were ready to embrace change. Their willingness to participate in the change process was reflected in their endeavour to search for information and knowledge in the poverty alleviation process.

The research question of this article was: “How did the moderate and progressive poor people (in short, poor people) use information and knowledge for poverty reduction?” The research investigated the experience of the participants in relation to the role of information and knowledge in poverty reduction. The assumption was that the determinants of poverty reduction were either unknown or known but not effectively considered in poverty reduction policies.

## **2. Definition of key terms**

### **2.1 Poverty reduction**

Poverty reduction is a difficult concept to define because there is a danger of assuming that the determinants of poverty reduction are known. If this were the case, then, there would be no need for this work. The central issue lies in defining poverty because being poor is associated with the deprivation of the means to live happily and in decent life. There have been different definitions of poverty but the issue lies in establishing a causal link between

the policy instrument for poverty reduction and the improved conditions of the poor people. The first thing to consider here is the difficulty in establishing that causal link, for example, between economic growth that will lift many people above a particular poverty line and poverty reduction. There could be a correlation but to establish the causal connection might be difficult. In addition, it is difficult to determine the policy instruments that lead to poverty reduction. The second thing to consider is the issue of deprivation in different dimensions of poverty other than income. What instrument will focus on a particular dimension and become effective again might be difficult to establish. After all, the poor people are diverse and have different cultures and understanding of their respective situation. Thus there is a need to adopt a definition that cuts across different dimensions of poverty and which will lead toward understanding poverty reduction.

According to Barder (2009), poverty reduction refers to an effort to promote economic growth that results in permanently uplifting many people out of poverty. This sounds like a universal policy leading to a consideration of whether to apply universalism or selectivity approach by targeting specific groups to ensure the policy was a success. Since the target is poverty reduction among the poor, then let us consider the poor as the universal and the entire population of the poor people would be beneficiaries of the social benefits brought about through the implementation of poverty reduction policy. Targeting would require determining those who deserve to benefit from such a policy and it would be difficult to ascertain that they all would be included. Nevertheless, it is difficult to have a pure universal or pure selective approach. Thus the inclination here is to lean towards the universal approach.

The definition given above only introduces the problem. In poverty reduction, we need to consider different objectives to be achieved to engender poverty reduction affecting different people in different circumstances and in different levels of poverty. We also need to consider poverty reduction in different periods, for example, one year against ten years to come, a sustainable process against a stopgap policy and poverty reduction involving few people against many people. These are tradeoffs which must be considered in the poverty reduction process. As such, it is difficult to have one definition that encompasses everything on poverty reduction. In this study, poverty reduction is a process that involves the progressive poor people in an effort to become aware of their condition and work towards bettering their living standard to specific agreed upon standards.

## **2.2 Information**

Information is news or knowledge given that leads to understanding something real or abstract. It passes from one person to another as content of message or through direct or indirect observation of a thing. It can be encoded, encrypted or transmitted. However, information as a message can have different meanings to different people and in different socio-economic contexts. It can result into a change because it has a potential to stimulate change. In this sense, Casagrande (1999) uses the concept as a verb to refer to a state change and not merely to the reduction of uncertainty or something emerging from raw data only. If poverty is considered as lack of basic capabilities, resources and money then access to information is a key to addressing poverty-related problems.

## **2.3 Knowledge**

Knowledge is familiarity, awareness and understanding of something. More specifically, the knowledge obtained through personal learning effort tends to empower and has the capacity to be permanent. Learning contributes to increased knowledge, self-confidence, creativity, improved imagination, memory and ultimately happiness.

## **3. Literature review**

Poverty reduction is a challenge many countries face. Poverty is a leading problem in Africa. By 2010, 49 percent of the African people were living under US\$ 1.25 a day, down from 58 percent in 1999 (Beegle & Ferreira 2014). Different approaches to addressing this problem such as the economic growth approach, basic needs approach, rural development approach, targeting approach and structural change approach have been applied but with relatively severely limited success. Different strategies to address that problem have been initiated. Yet, poverty persists regardless of the efforts made by different international organisations, the national government and the advancement in technology. The efforts are generally directed towards development and poverty reduction in poor countries, but it is not clear as to what is essential and what is not in these efforts. What needs to be clear is what to start with and what should come later, what should be achieved in the short-term and what in the longer term. The other dilemma whether the coverage of these poverty alleviation efforts should be targeted or universal. We are learning from this vexing poverty reduction paradox is that it would be fruitless efforts unless we have a deep understanding of the barriers that prevent the

poor people from escaping poverty. Alkire's (2002, p. 2) capability approach was fundamental in this study. The basic argument in this approach is:

*The goal of both human development and poverty reduction should be to expand capability that people have to enjoy valuable beings and doings. They should have access to positive resources that they need in order to have these capabilities. They should be able to make choices that matter to them.*

This approach leads to understanding what prevents the poor from escaping poverty because it values individual freedom to make choices regarding what is best for him/her as well as making productive decisions. It views poverty as a multifaceted reality. But much as this is a good approach to poverty reduction, still there is a need to have some standards because people's tastes are diverse and some of them deviate much from the social standards. Poverty reduction should strengthen human capability, raise per capita income, increase knowledge, strengthen power especially for decision-making and address all dimensions of poverty surround the poor person. This is in line with the ideas presented in the World Development Report of 2000/2001 which suggests that poverty reduction should follow a multidimensional approach in a bid to lead to increasing poor people's access to opportunity, security and empowerment.

Alongside the issue of poverty reduction is role that information and knowledge play in this endeavour. In fact, the extent of controversy surrounding poverty reduction confirms the need to examine what information and knowledge can contribute in the poverty reduction process. The World Bank (1993) on the Asia Miracle presented nine success elements which could be transferred to other countries and one of them was a heavy investment in human capital and, more significantly, investment in information and knowledge, which is considered to be a real mover in poverty reduction because it equips the individual with necessary tools for quality decision-making. The individual plays a central role in poverty reduction. In contrast, Brock *et al.* (2002) characterised poverty reduction in Uganda as a political process. Although it is true that some political input for mobilisation reasons is needed, a decisive and primary role is played by the individual poor and in the secondary place the government structural inputs should come in.

#### **4. Methodology, field findings and discussion**

A qualitative approach was used with interpretive phenomenological paradigm following the advice from Patton (2005) and focused on exploratory phenomenology (Ensslen, 2013; Yates *et al.*, 2008). The qualitative methodology was appropriate in exploring this problem because the researcher knew very little about the research phenomenon. As Strauss and Cobin (1995) contend, this methodology enables the researcher to get deeper insight into the problem at hand. Phenomenology research takes an experiential view regarding the phenomenon being studied, highlighting human experience as valid and important in understanding the problem under inquiry. The aim was to identify and describe the meaning the respondents had concerning their experience in the use of information and knowledge in poverty reduction (Flick, 2009) as well as learning from their experiences about the use of information and knowledge for poverty reduction.

The study covered Kagera, Shinyanga, Mara, Mwanza and Arusha Regions in Tanzania. An exploratory phenomenology design was adopted to generate insights into the research problem. The regions covered were conveniently selected due to easy access. The sample size of 76 was conveniently and subjectively selected based on the researcher's judgement, the purpose of the study and experience with the problem to enable the researcher to maximise the generalisation of insights but without providing a conclusive solution to the problem. Hycner (1999, p. 156) argues that phenomenon influences method and not the other way round. This idea strongly influenced the researcher's decisions. In addition, the researcher was interested in uncovering deep understanding and experiences of the respondents about the use of information and knowledge in poverty reduction. The selected design was deemed appropriate for the study and its basic presuppositions. The purpose of this study from the outset was to determine the function of information, knowledge, libraries and archives in poverty reduction. The study involved non-structured interviews, focused group discussions, in-depth interview and direct observation and data were collected from both rural and urban areas from 12 August 2014 to 30 October 2014.

#### **5. How the study unfolded**

An effective research work begins with identification of the topic, then the problem and then the development of the research question out of which a title is formulated. Creswell (1994) underscores the importance of the paradigm in research undertaking. The paradigm provides

patterns of thinking and beliefs and also guides how design actions are taken. Thus the epistemological position taken by the researcher in this study involved the following: a) a belief that respondents had knowledge about poverty, information search, appropriate knowledge they needed to help them address their life challenges and information quality; and b) a belief that respondents would fully co-operate with the researcher in data collection because the problem under study was not new to them. Thus, the opening question was: “What is your experience of searching and using information and knowledge for improving your life?”. This question evoked memories of various things relevant to the problem. Other issues in the form of thematic followed to gain a deep understanding of the perceptions of experience. Cross-referencing questions were also asked to ensure rigour in the interviewing exercise and to get clarification on the experiences of the respondents.

The researcher met the respondents in the field and conducted the interviews with them accordingly. Internet search was also conducted. To ensure ethical research conduct, the researcher obtained informed consent from the participants. Since the research problem was of interest to the respondents, the issue of deception was minimal or absent. Moreover, voluntary participation was guaranteed. Respect for the participants’ rights was also observed and confidentiality was confirmed. In addition, the focus group discussions (FGDs) followed the guidelines by Eliot and Associates (2005) and Dzija *et al.* (2005). Some groups had eight participants whereas others had 10. The in-depth interview was natural and was considered a form of conversation in which the respondent participated voluntarily and the researcher posed questions which were answered by the respondent. This followed Kvale’s (1996, p. 4) idea that the researcher may be an active player in developing data and meaning.

With different FGDs and different in-depth interviews conducted it was possible to triangulate data to compare and contrast as well as validate the data to determine whether they yielded similar findings. The interview exercise stopped when the problem was exhausted and no new perspectives were being obtained.

## **6. Data handling**

Bailey (1996) recommends audio-recording the findings after obtaining permission from the interviewee. But this was not done because the tools were not available. Instead, the researcher had a notebook in which all notes were recorded and stored. The researcher took

all necessary precautions as advised by Lofland and Lofland (1999, p. 5) and Bailey (1996). The field notes also marked the beginning of data analysis (Morgan, 1997, p. 57) because they reflected a kind of interpretation. In phenomenology research the datum is the consciousness of human being, the lived experience of the respondents. As such, the data were not prematurely categorised into the researcher's biased categories.

The field findings were congruent with the reality on the ground because they reflected the attitude of the respondents in their respective areas. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest conducting long interviews and these were undertaken with the respondents. Furthermore, Yin (1994) calls for the operationalisation of key variables to facilitate measurements; however, there were no measurements in this qualitative study. In addition, major data collection strategies involved triangulating of data collection methods as it involved interviews and observation whose combination compensated for the individual limitations of each data collection method (Guba, 1981; Brewer & Hunter, 1989). Moreover, the respondents were picked from different parts and similar findings emerged, hence bolstering the credibility of the research findings.

Data analysis followed a descriptive path for promoting understanding from patterns. However, generalisation was not included; instead, transferability to other similar settings was acknowledged (Trochim, 2006). Weick (1979) considers this method to be fair and meaningful. The study considered verbal dimensions only. Also, the study employed thematic analysis. According to Boyatzie (1998), thematic analysis is a categorizing strategy for qualitative data, which focuses on identifying patterns from broad reading of data and developing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher developed themes that emerged from the research questions.

Table 1 summarises findings. The findings came from the respondents' opinion on the use of information and knowledge in poverty reduction efforts. During fieldwork four types of field notes emerged: a) observational and interview notes whereby the former involved making observation with all senses of the researcher active and the latter which involved conducting interviews; b) theoretical issues which involved attempts at developing a deep understanding and derivation of meaning and experiences from the respondents; c)

methodological notes which involved reminding the respondents about appointments; and d) end notes which summarised the daily work.

**Table 1: Field findings**

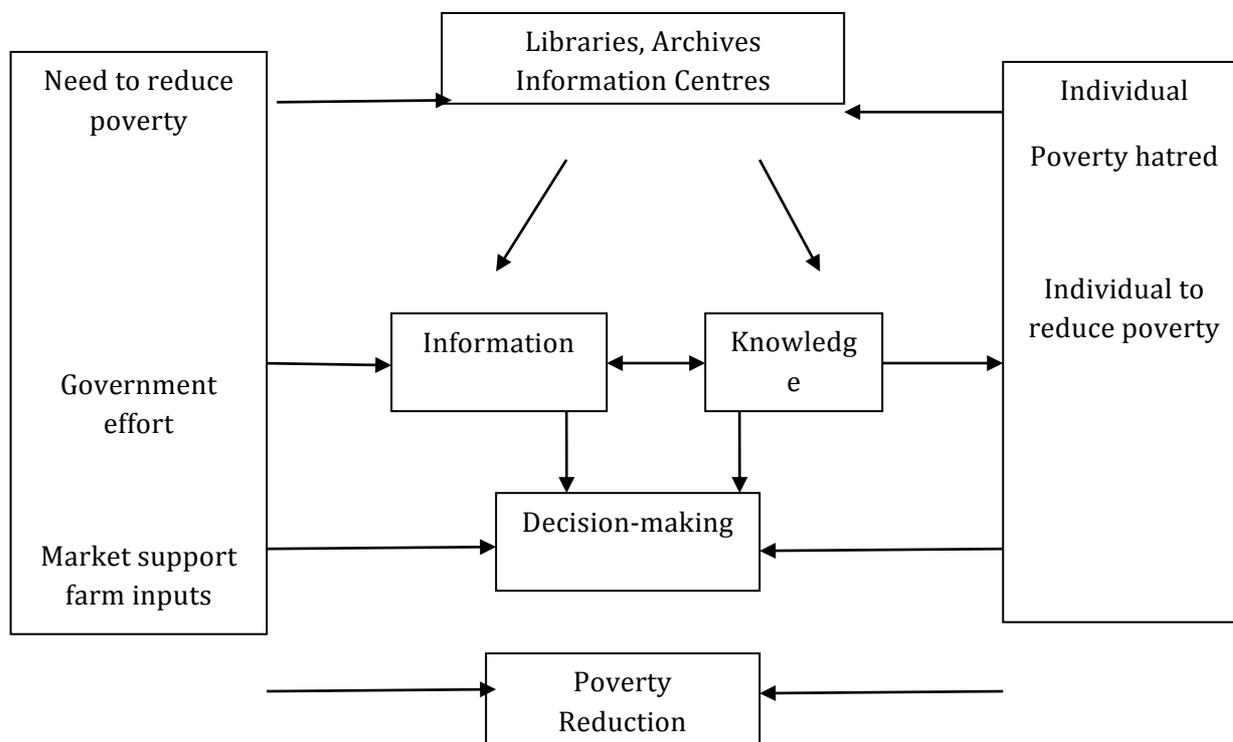
<b>Theme (central themes)</b>	<b>Sub theme</b>	<b>Appearance/interview</b>
Meaning of poverty and poverty reduction	a. conceptualisation of those concepts	100
	b. poverty reduction possibility	70
	c. causes of poverty: multiple, complex and their mutual reinforcement	60 61
	d. accepting the state of poverty	
	e. what the poor living in poverty think about themselves	56
	f. what the poor people say about living in poverty	89
Readiness to accept and carry out poverty reduction measures	a. not ready	76
	b. not wanting change	80
	c. wait and see	85
	d. ready to act	65
	e. someone will do something	60
Awareness of library, information centres and archives	a. they are for education and training	14
	b. sources of information and knowledge	70
	c. do not know them	80
	d. not aware of them	54
	e. library as a meeting place	46
	f. planning period	78
Link between information, knowledge and poverty reduction	a. information and knowledge do not lead to poverty reduction	109
	b. no relation/link	97
	c. information necessary for poverty reduction	89
Quality and quantity of information and knowledge	a. searching for information and knowledge	76
	b. projects that need information	90

	c. credibility of the information and knowledge sources	65
	d. adequacy of information and knowledge	73
	e. knowledge in life	86

The study findings came from respondents’ perception of role of information and knowledge in poverty reduction. Another part of the findings came from the literature. The thematic process revealed five large areas of concern presented in Table 1.

### 7. Data explication

Hycner (1999 p.161) advises that it is advisable in phenomenology research to use explication which allows for an investigation of phenomenon while keeping the content of the whole context instead of going for data analysis as is the case with other types of research. In this regard, the phenomenon studied should not be reduced to the cause-effect relationship but it should be considered it in its own right with its own meaning (Hycner, 1999; Fouche, 1993). The researcher attempted to ensure that his interpretations, meanings and theoretical concepts did not derail the meaning held by the respondents. The researcher read three times the field notes to become familiar with the respondents’ words and language and develop a holistic picture. Then the researcher made a list of all the statements that were relevant to the study phenomenon, the literal content, how many times similar statements sharing meaning appeared and how they were stated. Then the researcher formed clusters of themes out of which central themes were developed (see Table 1). Five central themes were identified. When comparing the themes, the researcher read the original data again and again for cross-viewing. The findings reflect the way the respondents used information to make decisions pertaining to poverty reduction. This presented in Figure 1 showing the linkages.



**Figure 1: Poverty Reduction Model**

**8. Discussion**

Figure 1 shows how information and knowledge led to decision-making rather than to poverty reduction. In other words, this is not a direct link. In fact, it is a complex chain of linkages until there is something noticeable at the poverty level. It takes time depending on parameters involved, and this needs some further studies to determine them.

Generally, exploratory-phenomenology research has two important things. The first is that experience is valid, important, strong and constitutes a source of knowledge, and the second is the idea that everyday life is a valuable and productive source of knowledge (Becker, 1992). The respondents’ experience on the role of information and knowledge in poverty reduction illuminated on their understanding of the nature of poverty reduction effort. The meaning was co-created by the researcher and the respondents who experienced the phenomenon.

One basic experience noted from the study was that the respondents were aware of searching and using information for productive use and the researcher was able to establish how the

respondents were using information and knowledge in consciously or unconsciously reducing poverty. Study participants spoke of accessing information through their mobile phones, oral and from notice-boards. They accessed knowledge through reading books. But libraries were absent altogether and there was no effort to start them even locally within the residential houses. In remote areas they did not even know that obtaining information leads to knowing where they could sell something at prices likely contribute to poverty reduction. Respondents in semi-urban areas, on the other hand, enjoyed quick and uninterrupted access to information and expressed how valuable it was for them regarding the market condition. Participants indicated the need to improve the communication network so that they would continue getting timely information and whenever they needed it. The findings from this study provide a strong argument that participants were aware of the functions of information and knowledge in increasing their income.

After examining the elements or sentences from the respondents, the researcher produced a model that provides further insights into the use of information and knowledge in poverty alleviation efforts. The model does not suggest a linear relationship or a causal relationship. Instead, it shows that the government effort and individual effort are equally important in poverty reduction initiatives. As a process, poverty reduction proceeds in stages and the government may help in monitoring the changes because necessary inputs for that process differ from one stage to another. One of the areas the government may act upon is strengthening the sources of information and knowledge and enhance their ready availability to ensure they were helpful to the poor people.

## **9. Conclusion**

This study reflects the desire to reconsider various strategies in poverty reduction in Tanzania. Politicians, scholars, religious leaders and various people have been searching for answers to questions on why the poverty level in Tanzania remains so high after more than 50 years of independence and concerted efforts aimed at addressing the problem. Wanting to contribute to the debates on poverty reduction, wanting to understand the social world of the poor people and wanting to explore how the poor people use information and knowledge in poverty reduction were the motives behind this study. Much more significant was to get a firm grasp of the poor people's views on the role of information and knowledge either from libraries, information centres, and archives or from different other sources in poverty

reduction. The crux of the matter was whether the poor people understand that information and knowledge contribute to poverty reduction. The model generated from the findings from this study reveals a link between the two variable sets. It has been established that information and knowledge empower recipients. Since poverty reduction involves decision-making, quality information and knowledge are necessary inputs. The quality component has to be ascertained by the poor people themselves although the government also has a role to play. Therefore, the model provides insight into that relationship and thus can be used as a technical tool to remind the government of the role it has to play in this regard as well as the poor people that are central and whose meaningful contribution can help keep poverty at bay. It is hoped that the understanding generated and incorporated in this model can help demonstrate the importance of libraries, information centres, and communication network and infrastructure in Tanzania in efforts aimed at alleviating poverty.

The study used the qualitative methodology of exploratory-phenomenology to collect in-depth information on the complex problem of the role of information and knowledge in poverty reduction. The goal was to demonstrate that libraries, information centres and archives have a cardinal role to play in poverty reduction by providing and enhancing information and knowledge. Specifically, it explored the poor people's views on their usage of information and knowledge in poverty reduction efforts. The quality of findings in this study lies in the complex and comprehensive themes that emerged from the findings, which illuminate areas of knowledge about poverty, actions toward poverty reduction, reading culture, searching and using information and knowledge, use of information and knowledge in poverty reduction efforts and searching for quality information and knowledge to add value to poverty reduction efforts. The research was limited in its ability to generalise the findings. A total of 76 participants drawn from different contexts reflecting varied poverty situations were involved in the study. The findings enrich our understanding of the linkage between information and knowledge access and acquisition and poverty reduction strategies. In this regard, the findings have potential value that development scholars can exploit and build on. As such, further studies are recommended in establishing the relationship between information obtained and poverty reduction initiatives. Furthermore, studies are needed in determining the quality information that is appropriate to sustainable for poverty reduction efforts. Finally, there is a need to investigate the link between information flow and stages in poverty reduction.

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