

## **Harnessing expertise and practices in information and knowledge management for poverty eradication**

A keynote paper

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### **1. Introduction**

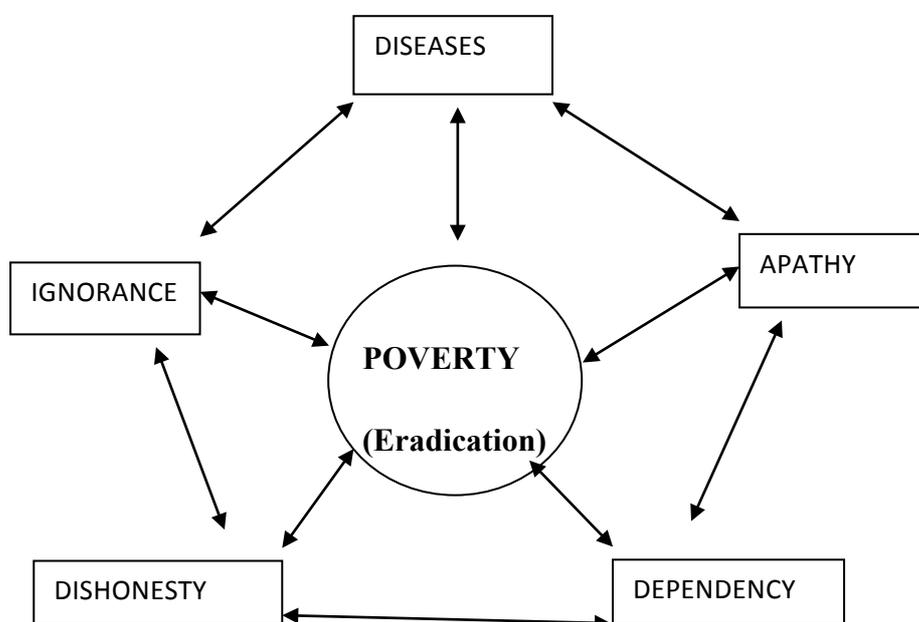
*The Bible, one of the oldest books, has long time philosophers who recognise the centrality of knowledge in human life. Some of the biblical verses include: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...” Hosea 4: 6; “An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge” Proverbs 18: 15.*

This paper is based on literature in information and knowledge as they relate to poverty eradication or reduction, as well as the author’s experiences drawn from community information research work (2004-2008). The entry point as Information Professionals (IP) in this matter is on the contribution of IP to the first of the eight UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), “Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger”. As pointed out by Bandara (2013), this goal can be achieved by taking up multidisciplinary actions, meaning that there will be many actors, all aiming at the same goal.

Poverty is a complex issue and its meaning has raised discussions in clarifying what it means and how it can be defined. The European Union, for example, identifies two types of poverty: absolute or extreme poverty and relative poverty. Absolute or extreme poverty occurs when people lack the basic necessities for survival (they may be starving, lack clean water, lack proper housing, lack sufficient clothing, etc. In short, these people are struggling to stay alive). This type of poverty is the most common in developing countries. On the other hand, in most of the EU countries poverty is generally understood as relative poverty which occurs “when some people’s way of life and income is so much worse than the general standard of living in the country or region in which they live that they struggle to live a normal life and to participate in ordinary economic, social and cultural activities” (EAPN, 2014).

The United Republic of Tanzania (URT, 1998 broadly explains poverty as “a state of deprivation prohibitive of decent human life” (URT, 1998). Essentially, poverty consists of two interacting deprivations—physiological and social. Whereas physiological deprivation refers to an inability to meet or achieve basic material and physiological needs, social deprivation is assessed at the individual or community level and refers to the absence of elements that are empowering.

Most recently, others have explained poverty within the concept of and closely linked to marginality and social exclusion (Joachim & Gatzweiler, 2014). People affected by poverty are marginalised from life systems: social economic, political, ecological or biophysical (ibid.). Bartle (2007<sup>a</sup>) advances another concept of poverty being *poverty of spirit*. This allows members of that community to believe in and share despair, hopelessness, apathy, and timidity. He argues further that poverty cannot be eradicated by alleviating its symptoms, rather by attacking its factors. The main five factors of poverty have been identified as ignorance, disease, apathy, dishonesty and dependency (Fig 1). These factors, in turn contribute to the secondary factors of poverty such as poor infrastructure, poor leadership, lack of market, bad governance, underemployment and several others (Bartle, 2007<sup>b</sup>).



**Figure 1: The main five factors of poverty**

Source: Bartle (2007<sup>b</sup>), modified by the author

For the sake of sustainability, the process to fight against poverty must be understood and owned by the affected people. The affected have to be empowered, feel responsible and be in-charge of their destiny.

As poverty is multidimensional, strategies to eradicate it have to be multi-dimensional and multidiscipline too. Almost all disciplines have a role to play in poverty eradication goal. For IPs or information managers, the point of entry stems from recognising that informed and knowledgeable parties are those who have been empowered to stand better chances in fighting against their problems including poverty. It is the intention of this paper to, among other things; stimulate discussions on practical strategies by IPs that aimed at contributing towards poverty eradication by reducing ignorance especially among rural population.

## **2. FOCUSING ON IGNORANCE AS A POINT OF ENTRY FOR IPs**

### **Ignorance**

Bartle (2007<sup>b</sup>) argues that winning the war against poverty entails directing attacks at the factors that contribute to the continuation of poverty rather than those attacking the symptoms. It is understood that the main factors of poverty are interwoven. As such, breaking the cycle of poverty, therefore, requires interventions directed against each of the major factors in the cycle. Indeed, these are factors we can do something about, ignorance being one of them.

The diversity of reasons behind poverty notwithstanding, one scenario that is apparent is that relative or absolute ignorance of already available ideas and technologies seem to be one of the major factors behind under-exploitation of existing opportunities that could otherwise make much impact on the poverty problem. In this respect, ignorance is taken to mean lack of information leading to lack of knowledge about something, and includes wrong perceptions. As pointed out by Bartle (ibid.), something can be done to overcome ignorance unlike stupidity and foolishness. The bottom line assumption is that there is still a gap between available knowledge, on the one hand, and the communities in need of such knowledge for their development, on the other. This is the IPs' point of entry.

### **3. Who are Information Professionals and what is their potential contribution to poverty eradication goal?**

According to SLA (2014), an Information Professional (“IP”) strategically uses information in his/her job to advance the mission of the organisation. This is accomplished through the development, deployment, and management of information resources and services. The IP also harnesses technology as a critical tool to accomplish goals. IPs include librarians, knowledge managers, chief information officers, web developers, information brokers, and consultants (ibid.).

The IP has the mandate to manage and enhance access to information and access to knowledge. A popular saying among IP is: “Information is power and at a higher stage Knowledge is power”. Knowledge is power because it empowers people so that they may take control of their own development. As a matter of professional requirements, the IP does not keep knowledge to themselves. IPs gather knowledge on the information needs of the community to facilitate access to relevant knowledge. However, the information needs should be mapped accurately with available information. According to Olaronke *et al.* (2011), IPs can make a substantial contribution to the paradoxical situation where there is scarcity of information and information explosion at the same time. This implies that IP target the scourge of information poverty. The IPs themselves should be active in making people aware of the importance and role of information for development. They are expected to design innovative ways of disseminating and sharing information, and facilitate access to information.

### **4. Information and knowledge management as drivers for poverty eradication**

*The Assumption: Adoption of innovative ideas and technologies for poverty eradication and development is hindered by restricted or limited access to information and knowledge.* In simple terms, knowledge is what one know, it is a combination of information, experience and insights that may be beneficial to individuals or organisations. McKeen (2001) argues that in a new economy, the basic economic resource is no longer capital but knowledge; it is the most important factor of production (traditionally others have been Land, Labour and Capital). Some literature indicates that knowledge makes a significant contribution to a country’s GNP. Examples include Korean GNP, which is identified to have risen by six times

in thirty years (Mchombu & Mchombu, 2014) because of deliberate initiatives to increase knowledge among its citizen.

Knowledge Management (KM), as a discipline, is a concept which originated from explosion of information in the 1990s. So far there are various definitions, but generally, KM means making the right knowledge available to the right people. Some scholars have defined it as the process of capturing, distributing and effectively using organisational knowledge (Koenig, 2012). It is divided into explicit (found in documents, databases, etc) and tacit or implicit knowledge (the know-how, experience-based, personal in nature).

KM has provided opportunities to IPs to embrace management of both the explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. The IPs should realise these opportunities, change attitude to keep abreast with the requirements of the knowledge age/knowledge-driven economy.

## **5. Libraries in the knowledge age**

The twenty-first century libraries are operating in the economy which is knowledge-driven, the economy which demand access to information to enable delivery of services and products be it health, agriculture, trade and other economic activities; they all need information. This situation makes libraries and IPs in general remain relevant now as they have been.

However, it is observed that libraries, like many other institutions, are being transformed by the technological and economic forces that are taking place worldwide. Libraries are changing to become learning and knowledge centres; they are expected to serve as gateways to knowledge. Inevitably, library services have changed or have to change to match with the expectations of their patrons. Consequently, the role of librarians of present day has also changed; they are managing digital libraries and electronic resources; they are spending more time guiding users on how to navigate the internet effectively, and less and less time on how to navigate through library shelves (Rao & Babu, 2001).

With the advent of the WWW, there have been debates as to the relevancy of libraries and librarians in digital/internet era. However, it is becoming apparent that the Internet is complementing libraries rather than replacing them. At present, the trend is to integrate e-learning through “WebCT” and “cyberlianship”. A study in the US in 2012 suggests that the demand for libraries may be as high as ever even though for different reasons from traditional ones, and that users look at a library as an important technical resource (McMillan, 2013).

What is inescapable is that the format of libraries is changing from mostly physical to a combination of physical and virtual; however, irrespective of the format they remain libraries. Despite the debates on the usefulness of libraries today, there are many reasons behind the libraries' continued importance. A detailed discussion on the usefulness of libraries in the present time is available on College online (2014).

For libraries to become even more meaningful than ever before, remain relevant and be seen that they matter in the development process, they have to be proactive and be visible as active partners in development. As Stuart (2013) argues, libraries are not just about access to information but also about offering expertise on use of information. It has been pointed out before that sometimes librarians remain as background players who has minimal visibility of the work they do in the community. This is one of the areas where change in approach and attitude is required.

## **6. Libraries and information services for rural development and poverty eradication in Tanzania**

IPs in general and Librarians in particular need to re-think on reaching out to the majority of the population who live in rural areas. In respect to access to information, people at the grassroots who are actually the most poor are theoretically supposed to be served by the public library system under the Tanzania Library Services Board (TLSB). However, libraries under TLSB are to a great extent poorly resourced and most of them are located in urban areas. Furthermore, it is not very clear how these libraries in their current form could be used effectively by people in rural areas. Other libraries such as research and university libraries, on the other hand, are relatively more endowed and in some cases have materials that could be better utilised for basic information needs by the public (Personal experience, 2001<sup>1</sup>). However, for the time being, there is no clear relationship between these two library systems or a mechanism to enable them to collaborate and work together with respect to a common goal of poverty eradication. Although these two systems serve the interest of the country's economic development, they work in isolation rather than as one strong body. It is evident that people in rural areas are changing, and in some cases they are changing rapidly; the

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<sup>1</sup> Discussions with farmers who visited SNAL pavilion during Farmers' week exhibitions in Morogoro, in 2001. Following their interest in some reading materials the library ordered for more materials for them.

impact of globalisation is observed in rural areas just as it is observed in urban areas, particularly the influence of Information and Communication Technologies (Sife *et al.*, 2010). A few years back the rural people, for example, in Tanzania were literate enough to benefit from recorded information (Matovelo, 2008). Literate and awareness levels are most likely much higher today than they were in 2008. Despite this change, there is a gap in literature regarding the current role of the library facility in meeting the farmers' information needs. In view of the prevailing situation, the IPs may have to take a leading role in proposing and spearheading practical and sustainable mechanisms to reach out to rural areas where the majority of the population is found.

The idea to involve libraries, particularly the public library services for meeting the information needs of rural communities, has frequently been recommended by various scholars in developing countries such as Ikhizama and Oduwole (2003), Okiy (2003), Manda (2002), Aina (1991) and Namponya (1986).

Likewise, the attempt to take knowledge to rural people through libraries in Tanzania is not a new idea. It was long recognised by the TLSB and hence its rural library scheme and mobile libraries to serve farmers and peasants in rural areas (Mwasha, 1985; Kaungamno & Ilomo, 1989). This move was in response to the government's constant urge to direct resources to rural development and to wipe out illiteracy. The mobile library service and the rural library scheme, however, did not last long enough to have their impact felt in the Tanzanian rural areas. Failure of these libraries was attributed to the use of untrained personnel, the largely illiterate environment, lack of permanent structures, dependence on donor funding and the absence of relevant materials (Kilindo, 1989). In addition, a number of other researchers have pointed out the ineffectiveness of the rural libraries when they were set up as extensions or replicas of urban public libraries rather than being established based on the actual needs and end-user participation (Katundu & Nyerembe, 2002; Durrani, 1985).

Although rural libraries in Tanzania did not demonstrate good results, some governments in developing countries such as China (Xu, 2001) and Nigeria (Aboluwarin, 1998) have had a successful deliberate focus on rural libraries in their efforts to improve agricultural productivity. Also, rural libraries are known to function by meeting the information needs of rural people in many other parts of the world such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, India and Russia whose success, as pointed out by Okiy (2003), has been

attributed to innovative library services. In Malawi, a study by Sturges and Chimseu (1996) stresses the role of the national library system in meeting the information needs of the rural agricultural community. For the libraries to play a bigger role in providing information to the rural population, Asamoah-Hassan (1997) challenged librarians to have new approaches and a change in attitude so that they demonstrate interest and innovativeness when serving rural communities. Similar challenges have been advanced by Okiy (op. cit.) who urges libraries to discard their traditionally docile role as repositories/custodians of knowledge and ideas so that they become more active as disseminators of knowledge for rural development. Communities must also be involved in the decision-making process right from the planning stage in, for example, determining the materials that will be useful and the formats which will be acceptable to them, so as to achieve the desired results. The process of establishing the services has to be participatory to be acceptably by and useful to the community (Matovelo, 2008). There is no doubt that there are a number of countries that involve libraries in development process. In this regard, Tanzania need not re-invent the wheel by adopting the approach that is working well in other countries similar to Tanzania but customised for use in this country. What is being underscored here is that rural areas should be given a much higher consideration in development programmes, including information service programmes to have more impact in fighting against poverty. As Nyerere argued, for the country to have significant economic development, efforts to address ignorance and eradicate poverty must also be directed to rural areas where the majority of the population is found: “While other countries aim to reach the moon, we must aim, for the time being, at any rate, to reach the village” (Nyerere, 1968).

## **7. Training IP for Knowledge-driven economy**

It is apparent that libraries today are technologically-driven even as they adhere to traditional principles. Rapid changes in the information management sector calls for regular training and re-tooling or continuous professional development of IP to reflect the environment in which IP works. In view of the requirements to match with knowledge-driven economy, there is also a need to review the curriculum for IP programmes to reflect the changing role/enhanced role of librarians and other information professionals as well as knowledge managers. We must always be conscious that there are many other information providers, especially those dealing with internet-based services, who are sometimes perceived as competitors or even rivals at

times to library and information professionals. We therefore must be strategic, innovative and creative to retain and attract users to the services we provide. In this regard, IP training institutions are challenged to come up with new programmes that will capture emerging issues and user requirements. Also, there is still room for making improvement in terms of establishing innovative and attractive programmes in our institutions. In the context of knowledge-driven economy, information professionals would be better equipped if they are also equipped with communication skills (Gulati & Raina, 2000). Issues that may be considered in the revised curriculum include KM and IL, Communication and marketing skills, “infopreneurship” , “cyberlianship”, digital library, repositories, and the Web 2.0+ (and library 2.0+) particularly with respect to application of social media for professionals.

### **8. Collaboration with other actors and building team work**

The fight against poverty is an initiative that must combine the resourcefulness of a diverse body of actors in this field. IPs at the front of Information Management must draw from and work with researchers, on the one hand, and educators or outreach agents, on the other hand. Researchers play an important role in the creation and generation of new knowledge available for processing into information packages ready for sharing and dissemination to outreach agents and other target consumers. Consequently, IPs are challenged to pool information resources from various knowledge development initiatives and actors and render it available for beneficiaries. Accordingly, to realise the ideals advocated by IP, collaboration between IPs themselves, on the one hand, and researchers, educators as well as outreach, on the other hand, is a matter of necessity. In this wake of collaborative initiatives, IPs should endeavour to initiate and/or participate in platforms that promote harnessing of expertise and practices in information and knowledge management.

Collaboration and co-operation in terms of sharing knowledge, skills, and materials is not new; it is a well known tradition particularly to librarians whereby libraries, for example, have had agreements about resources to acquire and share. Collaborations have ranged from those that are simple and informal to the formal and complex collaborative schemes. In the present era of advanced information technology, collaboration between IPs is even more important and necessary than ever before because of the explosion of information, the availability of numerous software and systems, both simple/ordinary and advanced ones, as well as users of information that are inevitably more demanding and sophisticated in their

demand. Knowing that no single profession can do everything or go into all the emerging technologies, we must be prepared to build new relationships and networks, identify and invest in areas where we are most competent. We need to establish a platform for sharing ideas and solutions to problems that are common to all. Accordingly, collaborations should be viewed as inevitable strategies to cope with changes and challenges in the digital world. For the IP to remain relevant and excel under these circumstances, they must demonstrate willingness, ability and competence to attract users to information facilities and retain them. Some areas or issues where collaboration and or co-operation are needed include organising joint short training to build capacity, particularly in the application of IT in information management, establishing ways to share IT resources including human resources. A special focus is needed to look into modalities for acquiring and maintaining a common integrated library system for libraries in Tanzania (Library automation software), as well as establish and maintain common electronic catalogues and repositories. We may also discuss having joint policies such as policy on document borrowing, purchasing expensive equipment jointly for digitisation and microfilm.

In as far as collaborative initiatives are concerned, COTUL's initiatives and efforts to enhance access to information and building team work is commended and should be supported to ensure the sustainability of these initiatives.

### **9. Some challenges to be worked upon**

The most critical challenge that we need to reflect upon as IPs in the knowledge-technology driven economy is about the paradigm shift in the library and information profession. This calls for a change in attitude, ways of thinking and ways of doing things. We must be prepared to acquire (by training or other means) and apply new knowledge and skills in information management.

Although information plays an important role in almost every human activity, its value in the development process is a topic of extensive debate, probably because of its indirect relationship to development. The challenge here is on three aspects. The first involves how to articulate the role of information and knowledge so that they are clearly viewed as key tools in combating poverty. The second aspect involves lobbying and advocacy for commitment and support from policy-making organs and leaders for initiating and attaining sustainable information management facilities at all levels in the development process. The third aspect is

related to the challenge of focusing on rural areas. Specifically, there is need to find an acceptable and practical mechanism or platform to enhance teaming up with various information-knowledge players (governmental organs, NGOs, CBOs), look into various disjointed efforts to come up with a comprehensive plan to direct enough effort towards rural areas to reach out to the majority of the population.

With respect to the successful collaboration and co-operation, there should be a feeling of shared responsibility and respect for each other irrespective of the size of institutions in terms of available resources, human and other resources, as well as technological advancement and challenges at individual institutions.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

Information and knowledge are drivers for poverty eradication because they are empowering. They empower people to make decisions—write or wrong, but in this case right decisions. For purposes of empowerment, people need to be informed or be aware of their environment and their potentials. For knowledge to trickle down, there should be deliberate efforts to manage, disseminate and share it, which is the point of entry for IPs. The IPs should be abreast with an inevitable transformation in information and library profession as a result of rapid technological changes. Also, for IPs to remain visible, cope and excel as user-centred in the knowledge-technology-driven economy, they should reflect upon necessary retooling, change in ways of thinking and doing things, embrace collaborative approaches and team work as strategies not only for coping and excelling but also for remaining valuable contributors to the first UN's Millennium Development Goal, "Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger".

## **11. RECOMMENDATIONS**

COTUL is requested to find ways of organising seminars and workshops on emerging issues of importance for IPs. Such training and retooling platforms would have an impact in line with the paradigm shift mentioned in this paper.

There is also a need to set up a team of professionals (preferably on voluntary basis) to try and articulate the role of IP in poverty eradication initiatives with the aim of influencing policy changes towards mainstreaming information and knowledge as economic resources.

Furthermore, there is a need to initiate collaborative projects for the acquisition, use and maintenance of an integrated library system for Tanzania's libraries (maybe have a common system for university and research libraries, for public libraries, etc).

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