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The Challenges Faced By African Libraries And Information Centres In Documenting And Preserving Indigenous Knowledge.

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Abstract

African libraries and Information centres are faced with a plethora of challenges in the documentation of indigenous knowledge. Among the challenges is the lack of legal frameworks at national and international level to support the library efforts. Financial, human capacity and technology shortages pose a challenge to the documentation of indigenous knowledge in many African countries. The fast developing Information Communication Technologies continues to create a deficiency on how best libraries can document and disseminate this widely oral and community based knowledge to a widely globally accepted knowledge base. The paper discusses these challenges looking at some of the lessons learnt and the best practices that have emerged in dealing with the challenges noted.

Introduction

Warren (1995) defined indigenous knowledge (IK) as “local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. IK is the systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through accumulation of experiences, informal experiences and intimate understating of the environment in a given culture.”¹

Indigenous knowledge is an essential resource to any human development process. It informs decision-making at any level. It has been used for many years in natural resources management and to answer a plethora of social problems including health, poverty, agriculture production and food security. African communities are using this knowledge to respond and manage the HIV and AIDS pandemic in the care and treatment of opportunistic infections.

It is a complete body of knowledge, know-how and practices maintained and developed by peoples, generally in rural areas, who have extended histories of interaction with the natural environment. These interactions set understandings, interpretations and meanings that are part of a cultural complex encompassing language, naming and classification systems, practices for using resources, rituals, spirituality and a worldview. It provides the basis for local-level decision-making about many fundamental aspects of day-to-day life such as hunting, fishing, agriculture and animal husbandry; food production; water; health; and adaptation to environmental or social change.

According to Fernandez (1994) indigenous knowledge is greatly affected by social stratification. Women have much more knowledge of soil classification for cultivation, hut construction and pottery, while men have more knowledge on livestock management as determined by their social roles. Critical to note is that, the primary social differentiation among adult, economically active members of a society is based on gender. Specific spheres of activity become the domains of different genders as they increase their knowledge and skill over time.

Indigenous knowledge is predominantly tacit, embedded in the practices and experiences of its holder. It is commonly exchanged through personal communication and demonstrations from the teacher to the apprentice, from parents to children, from neighbour to neighbour. IK is disseminated and preserved through various family histories, taboos, symbols, myths/legends, rituals, sounds/dances, festivals, proverbs, poetry, literature – *izibongo*(praise poetry) *lenganekwano* (folkstories), drama, theatre, role plays; folklore and other systems.

This knowledge is vulnerable to attrition if not recorded for storage and wider transmission. In traditional societies there were assigned gatekeepers of specialist knowledge such as *griots* in West African culture and *imbongi* (custodians of genealogies) among the Zulu and Ndebele people. The World Bank has added a voice to the warning that IK faces extinction unless it is properly documented, analysed and disseminated and that within one generation the knowledge could be lost forever.

A number of strategies have been propounded on the documentation of IK these include isolation, documentation and storage in international, regional and national archives, and databases for wider communication outside their communities of origin.

Importance of Indigenous knowledge

Indigenous knowledge has two powerful advantages over outside knowledge. It is cheap and readily available to most communities and social groups. Indigenous knowledge is socially desirable, economically affordable, a sustainable resource and involves minimum risk to rural farmers.

IK improves understanding of local conditions and provide a productive context for activities designed to help communities. In addition, the use of IK ‘assures that the end users of specific agricultural development projects are involved in developing technologies appropriate to their needs’ (Warren, 1993)².

Documentation of Indigenous Knowledge

Very little of the indigenous knowledge has been done to capture and recorded for preservation yet it represents an immensely valuable database of knowledge that provides humankind with insights on how numerous communities have interacted with their changing environments including flora and fauna resources. Efforts to capture and preserve indigenous knowledge have concentrated on the documentation of good practices that can be transferred across cultures and communities. African’s indigenous knowledge needs to be codified into print and electronic formats for both audio and video to make it widely accessible on the global information infrastructure (Chisenga, 2000).

Equally important is the documentation of indigenous knowledge to be available in the language that is understood by other communities as it ceases to be locally specific. The process of documenting IK is widely viewed as technically easy, yet it can be laborious, time-consuming, costly, and sometimes disappointing.

The importance of documenting IK is to ensure that communities are not left impoverished as a result as the world needs genetic diversity of species, it needs diversity of knowledge systems (Labelle, 1997).

The World Bank (Kreszentia, 1999) has argued that the classic failure of different western oriented development models has forced development practitioners and the Bank to appreciate the importance and critical role of IK in fostering sustainable development. The former President of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn, said, “Indigenous knowledge is an integral part of the culture and history of a local community. We need to learn from local communities to enrich the development process”³.

The documentation of IK is important and an acceptable way to validate it and grant it protection from biopiracy and other forms of abuse. In the world of globalisation and knowledge societies, IK has to be recognized and paid for. Documentation provides evidence that local communities are the owners of a complex and highly developed knowledge system. The processes of documentation are necessary to establish the claims of local communities to share profits obtained from the commercialization of products derived from their knowledge

Libraries and Indigenous Knowledge

The development of the human society has been based on the efficiency of the information exchange process among its members. This process involves collection, organization and the dissemination of information. The process of recording information and dissemination through written and printed media gave birth to the concept of the library (Weerasooriya, 1997). The concept developed gradually from library science to information science and to knowledge management. It has

emancipated itself from traditional resources of the written and printed word to incorporate other media communication and digital technologies.

While for many years worldwide, IK has been preserved and maintained by various institutions such as governments, university libraries, church libraries, museums, public libraries, private libraries, historical research institutions, literary societies and national archives (Sengupta and Charaborty, 1981: 29 –76.). However, the situation has been different with African libraries.

The development of libraries in Africa has not been a glamorous event, libraries were build initially for people whose knowledge was imported from colonial countries (Omole, 2002). The library was designed to serve the interest of the colonialist. They were small, served the minority and stocked books primarily of foreign content.

When independence came to many African states it did not transform the African libraries. They remained largely foreign as their development was either ignored by the new governments concentrating on other critical issues to uplift the status of Africans. Some states failed to enact laws to support library development. While those that managed to have laws, they remained on paper and no efforts were made to implement them. A case to consider is Zimbabwe's National Library and Documentation Services Act promulgated in 1986. This Act has widely remained on paper with nothing to show on the library development. Its major setback has been inadequate or no funding for planned programmes and the operationalisation of the act. What therefore, remains of the national documentation service is a pipeline dream for the many - shattering any hope for the documentation of indigenous knowledge.

On the other hand the funding gaps created by national governments have seen international donors coming in to support different library initiatives. These have brought with them other problems that challenged the documentation of indigenous knowledge. The material and financial support given left many public libraries stocked with textbooks and other foreign literature from the donor countries.

A point of reference in Zimbabwe can be the support availed to the public libraries system in Bulawayo (Zimbabwe's second biggest city) around the 1980s from the Nordic countries. The library collections grew considerably with western materials, while a few and insignificant materials were collected locally and most of these were textbooks and other schools related materials (setbooks) meant to support the massive education drive in the country.

Another aspect to consider has been the innovative and successful concept of the Rural Libraries and Resources Development Programme (RLRDP) in Zimbabwe. Established in 1990 to provide free of charge relevant and appropriate print and non-print materials. The project has established 300 rural school community libraries reached over 300 rural schools, it has ten donkey drawn mobile carts and 130 book delivery bicycles. However the project has not involved itself with the documentation of the abundant indigenous knowledge of the people it serves.

Looking at libraries and indigenous knowledge documentation it is apparent that they have to redefine their roles. This will place into context the role of the library in harnessing African indigenous knowledge for its users. Libraries need to redefine their information and knowledge sources and be able to appreciate that African indigenous knowledge is important and critical to social development.

Legal Framework International Conventions and National Policies

The success of any documentation of indigenous knowledge process rests on solid frameworks put in place to support the initiatives such as Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), Agenda 21 and others. Both international agreements and national laws and policies are important frameworks and tools that libraries should be armed with to deliver on the documentation of indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge movements, indigenous knowledge campaigners and some local communities across the world have impacted positively on multilateral agreements such as the CBD. The international community has recognised the traditional dependence of many indigenous and local communities on biological resources, notably in the preamble to the CBD, which has been ratified by 178 countries. As of now governments are in the process of implementing Article 8(j) of the convention through their national biodiversity action plans, strategies and programmes. These are some of the challenges taking place globally, which are facing Africa in relation to IK developments.

Agenda 21, adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 has also become an important framework supporting the documentation of IK. In Chapter 26 'Recognise and strengthen the role of Indigenous people and their communities' calls for;

'Recognition of their values, traditional knowledge and resources management practises with a view to promoting environmentally sound sustainable development,' and for the establishment ... of arrangements to strengthen the active participation of indigenous people and their communities in the national formulation of policies, laws and programmes relating to resource management and other development processes..."⁴

National indigenous policies are pivotal in the recognition and documentation of IK. However, what remains a challenge to many countries is that these are not in place in many African countries.

"A government ministry or department or any other public body must be charged with the drawing up of policy guidelines for IKS. These guidelines should specify the tasks to be undertaken e.g. surveying and documentation, and who is to implement the process and who is to monitor the progress."

Speaking at the launch of South Africa's Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy, Mosibudi Mangena - Minister of Science and Technology noted that the South African IK Policy is an enabling framework that ensures that indigenous and local communities are able to realise their full potential in society, and constitutes a basis for a successful achievement of all other national goals and aspirations.

Coordination

In many countries documentation of indigenous knowledge is not coordinated. Different players libraries, information centres, non-governmental organizations undertake different activities uncoordinated. The challenge facing libraries and information centres is to propose and undertake IK documentation through a coordinated mechanism. The coordination mechanism should be able to inform the different players what the other members are doing and provide a platform for the sharing of best practices and lessons learnt in the different approaches undertaken.

The coordination framework can also serve to mobilize resources that individual institutions may fail to raise. It will also monitor and help to protect communities from losing their knowledge to piracy. In Malawi coordination of these activities rest on the National Research Council as stated in the national information Policy that council of Malawi and related institutions to identify and isolate sources of technical IK for special archiving and blending with cosmopolitan knowledge.

Partnerships

According to Linden there is a growing number network of regional and national indigenous knowledge resource centres involved in documenting the historical and contemporary indigenous knowledge of numerous ethnic groups around the world. The centres reflect new values that recognize indigenous knowledge as an important national resource.

The centres are establishing national indigenous knowledge data bases, giving recognition to their citizens for the knowledge they have created, providing a protective barrier for the intellectual property rights of knowledge that could be exploited economically by the country of discovery, and laying the foundation for development activities that build on and strengthen the existing knowledge and organizational base produced through many generations of creative effort by local communities (Linden 1991).

While documenting indigenous knowledge demands time and is costly. There is a need for libraries to find ways to deal with the high costs of documentation by establishing partnerships that bring different organizations and institutions with comparative advantages in the various aspects of the documentation. Among these could be organizations such research institutions, media houses, farmer organizations, traditional healers organizations like in Zimbabwe the National Association of Traditional Healers (ZINATHA) and many others.

African universities and other development organizations have provided the solid foundations for partnerships that have helped libraries and information centers to confront the documentation of indigenous knowledge. Among notable successes has been the emergence of telecentres providing some-rural and peri-urban areas with access to some ICTs through the support of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) International Development Research Center (IDRC), World Bank British Council, UNDP, FAO International Union of the Conservation of Natural resources (IUCN) among others. All these organisations have formed sound partnerships in the documentation of indigenous knowledge.

Some of best practices that have emerged in some parts of Africa include; educational and cultural institutions working together in an attempt to transfer indigenous knowledge through education tours, teaching of music, dance and drama. The different programmes in place cater for different age groups and libraries in these institutions have been a critical component. The example of the James Dugurd Memorial library of the Zimbabwe College of music has collected various pieces of traditional music in the country through recording of cultural groups, bands through audiotapes, CDs, DVDs and other media to help in the teaching of this music.

Technology

Over the years the fast growing Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have presented an opportunity to up scale the documentation of indigenous knowledge for many libraries. However, these have not been a reality to many given the problems associated with their requirements, in costs, access and other issues. The level of development in most communities in Africa has made it difficult for libraries to document indigenous knowledge as libraries do not have access to these technologies. Electricity, and telephone connection in many communities is still a pipeline dream. The computer is still unknown too in some communities thus rendering the ICTs inappropriate to boost the documentation of IK.

While it might sound like painting a dark picture of Africa given the statistics that since 1995 access to the Internet and the World Wide Web has developed at a relatively faster pace than before on the African continent. Note has to be made that the rapid growth has been mainly in the continent's capital and secondary cities (Jensen 2001). As of August 2001 it was reported that around 4.15 million people were using the Internet. This is still minimal and a very insignificant figure.

The costs associated with ICTs are a challenge to many libraries and information institutions. Technology is not only changing at a phenomenal rate that libraries can hardly cope with, they have had to deal with the old discarded technology that not only has not spares incase of breakdowns it is not supported and at time can not be networked. Given that some of this is donated the personnel that are supposed to be using it are not trained if there are trained there are trained when the equipment comes and there is no further training. When a breakdown occurred there is noone able to attend to it. An expert has to be flown from the country that would have donated the equipment and at times to just come and advice the equipment is antiquated and it cannot be repaired.

Individualistic nature of IK

Documenting indigenous knowledge is greatly affected by the very nature of the knowledge that is individual based thus making it difficult to disseminated to other people. The knowledge is communicated to the child by its parents, or it could be ancestors communicating to one through dreams, incomprehensible language to many except the recipient only. It then becomes difficult for one or an institution like a library to therefore successfully document the knowledge even though it is important. The other dimension of individualistic nature of IK reinforces the concept of "knowledge as power." Knowledge is a source of status and income hence it is often guarded jealously it cannot be shared that easily. Doubleday 1993 argues that it is equally important to appreciate the perception that 'knowledge is power,' as certain individuals may not always be willing to share knowledge with others. Also related is that local people are suspicious of the documentation of IK outside their oral exchange, they fear it misused and it would be stolen and used against them or that if its documented it they will not have claim to it and they will remain powerless.

Validation of IK

The validation – checking for authenticity of indigenous knowledge during documentation is a challenge to many institutions and individuals. Magara noted from a SWOT (Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats) analysis it is not easy to

ascertain the authenticity of oral sources that are often forgotten. The challenge therefore, is on how to document this unrecorded knowledge without validation and claim it works. An example can be the discourse on traditional medicine treating HIV and AIDS as opposed to it addressing the opportunistic infections.

Protection and Copyrights

Documentation of indigenous knowledge is greatly challenged in light of intellectual property rights. Intellectual property rights are legal rights attached to information emanating from the mind of the person if it can be applied to making a product. The inadequacies of many property rights instrument to appreciate the communal nature of indigenous knowledge, and their focus on the economic value of information have failed to protect indigenous knowledge. This failure has made it difficult for libraries to document this knowledge. The most difficult aspects of indigenous knowledge in relation to property rights has been the communality of the knowledge and that it is oral not written or recorded. The more controversial aspects of indigenous knowledge are with traditional medicine when one considers that no one can claim the healer to share their medicinal secrets.

While the challenge exists there has been a number of initiatives to address these. Among these is the Economic Commission of Africa's recommendations that that oral traditional knowledge in African communities be exploited in all their forms of expression, recognising its right to intellectual property rights.

Institutional Capacity - Human Resources Challenge

A lot of indigenous knowledge has not been documented owing to the capacity challenges of many documentation institutions. A study in Malawi to inform the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan revealed that:

“...there is a lack of professional and institutional capability to document biological diversity information. As a result, biological diversity resources do not follow international and/or national documentation, classification and codification standard.”⁵

Documentation of indigenous knowledge has greatly suffered a blow as a result of library and information centres' human resources challenges. The brain-drain and lack of capacity to undertake the tedious process of documentation for the staff that has remained behind has hampered the documentation processes. The great track of professional has seen a number of library professionals in Africa leave for Europe or even to other parts of Africa. In Zimbabwe a number of professional librarians have over the past few years left the country to the neighbouring countries and beyond dealing a great blow to the field.

While it has been recommended that the best way of documenting indigenous knowledge is to use the different information communication technologies. The challenge has been many institutions have no capacity among their staff to use these technologies. There is a need to train locally or overseas staff to use some of the technologies that are critical in the documentation processes, however the dilemma is there are no financial resources to send the staff.

Conclusion and recommendations

There are a number of challenges confronting libraries in documenting and communication of indigenous knowledge. However, the growing need for this documentation call for the different institution to coordinate their efforts and form partnerships to address the issues of cost, capacity shortfalls among other issues.

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