

The Role of Community Based Information Centres in Development: Lessons for Rural Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Community based information proposals from the library profession in Zimbabwe should in theory fit well with government strategic goals for a “knowledge based society”. In reality, information technology has opened floodgates for international and national development by bringing in a plethora of community based information systems and services. This paper highlights developmental issues initiated by different community based information centres. It defines community, information, rural development and enunciates on community centers throughout their evolution to the modern community based information centres. The premise of the paper is that establishing community based information centres in Zimbabwean rural areas will strengthen and empower rural people to be among global players. The major scale of this paper is to provide platforms for erecting these centres in rural Zimbabwe for the purpose of providing everyone with useful, practical information for daily chores. Rural Zimbabwe has a bigger share in national and international development which can be achieved by harnessing community based information systems and services. Despite low level penetration of community based centres in Zimbabwe, the Matabeleland South initiatives have capacitated Zimbabweans to follow the trend. The centres should be spread throughout the country and provide information for development. Community based information centres can play a significant role in meeting social economic targets for rural people by connecting, empowering rural populace to developmental floodgates. The paper finally shows how community information based centres complement support for the government and agencies in resource sharing and enhances the services available through such centres.

Keywords: information, information technology, rural development, and community based information centres: Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Access to information is important as it is a driving force of modern society in developmental projects. People need information to develop their potential through education and training, to succeed in business, to enrich their cultural experience, and to take control of their daily lives. Information is a key contributor to the development of individuals and communities. Yet access to information is not equal. Some people, particularly those living in affluent urban centres, can choose from abundant sources of information. In contrast, people who live in poor communities are frequently denied access to the information that they need to improve their lives. The position is particularly severe in many rural areas in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. The rapid development of the internet, in particular, has irrevocably changed the information landscape. The nature of community based information centres has evolved accordingly in response both to technological change and the increased sophistication of information provision.

Community based information centres

Community based information are centres of excellence. The term “Information” normally, is a message, communicated by a communicator to a receiver. Gigeey (1988) defines community as “a group of people who have something common. This can be their age, education, religion, interest, political affiliation, activities, work, possession or a combination of two or more of these”. Community based information centres (CBIC) is information for the survival and growth of the community, or information required by members of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them and these members usually have some mutual obligation. The information service through which CBIC is provided to communities is called Community Information Service (CIS). Survival information, such as that relate to health, agriculture, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, and political rights is communicated among the peoples of communities.

The Cambridge dictionary (2010) defines development as when someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced. Malcolm (2003) says rural development generally refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. He argues that rural development has traditionally centered on the exploitation of land-intensive natural resources such as agriculture and forestry. However, changes in global production networks and increased urbanization have changed the character of rural areas. Increasingly tourism, niche manufacturers, and recreation have replaced resource extraction and agriculture as dominant economic drivers (Neil 2009). Rural

development is also characterized by its emphasis on locally produced economic development strategies. In contrast to urban regions, which have many similarities, rural areas are highly distinctive from one another. For this reason there is a large variety of rural development approaches use in Zimbabwe and community based information centres have the potential of transforming the livelihood of many.

The Evolution of the community based Centres

The concept of establishing community based information centres back dates to 18th century. The first attempts to improve access to information involved establishing collections of books and printed material as what was then named community libraries. In the early 1970s, community information centres began to appear. Their focus was on acquiring, processing, storing and disseminating the information that was needed by the community that they served. They were, therefore, less passive than the community libraries.

The first examples of community based libraries as information centres were found in Africa in the 1960s. They were usually initiated and funded by development agencies, working in conjunction with national or public library systems that were, themselves, part of a colonial legacy these sprouted in then Rhodesia town areas the Harare public library and Gweru community based libraries. Community-based library services are still operating, mostly in Africa, and they continue to meet a need (Mchombu and Cadbury, 2006). The basic aims of community libraries were to support the development of literacy skills and to supplement the formal education provision. Their focus was, therefore, usually on children and young people. Increasingly, however, they also played an important role in maintaining literacy skills among adults. The existence of community libraries often served as a catalyst for more wide-ranging information based activities. In Peru, South America, for example, the network of community libraries, *bibliotecas rurales*, has developed into an educational and cultural movement that incorporates literacy activities, local language publications, reading and learning (Ortiz, 1996). Perhaps because of the relatively high capital costs involved, the provision of community libraries was usually made by a government agency, such as a national or public library service, and often with assistance from an aid agency. As such, many of the centres were managed as part of the management structure of the sponsoring agency. This is the case with Zimbabwean community based libraries The National Library and Documentation Service (NLDS), working through the National Free Library, has facilitated the establishment of 41 school/community libraries. However, these libraries are only located in Matabeleland South Province.

Community based Information Centres (CBIC)

In common with developments in mainstream library services, there was a shift towards more dynamic centres that were concerned with the collection and provision of information, rather than simply with the management of collections of books. These community based information centres began to emerge in the early 1970s and a number are still providing valuable services today. Their focus was on acquiring, processing, storing and disseminating the information that was needed by the community that they served. The emphasis was on taking the information to the people who needed it most. There was a corresponding need to identify and satisfy information needs within the community. This rather more dynamic role implied the need for trained information staff. This reflected recognition of the importance of oral information and an oral culture in rural communities. Initially the focus of these centres was firmly on the needs of local businesses, particularly agriculture.

The aim was to provide individuals and communities with access to national and international information sources. The services were often, therefore, developed in partnership between an international organisation, such as the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations, or the International Rice Research Institute, and a country's Ministry of Agriculture. In the 1980s and 1990s, attention began to shift towards the need to meet the daily information requirements of individuals. This was especially true in areas like health, social empowerment, community development, information networking. The CBIC seeks to enhance development and reduce poverty in the region through providing much needed information, particularly in the areas of agriculture and health (Tadesse and Genesse, 2002.)

Telecentres and Community IT Centres

During the 1980s, when Zimbabwe was celebrating its independence the nature of community information centres began to reflect the growing importance of information and communication technology in creating, storing, transmitting and communicating information. Telecentres" and "community IT centres" became the new buzz-words. The technology, however, was still mainly analogue, consisting of telephones and fax machines, photocopiers, duplicators and printers. Many communities lacked these basic resources, and strenuous efforts were made to establish resource centres in urban and rural communities. The main focus of telecentres and IT centres was on meeting the information needs of the local business community, particularly subsistence farmers.

As time moved on, however, there was an emerging recognition of the need to develop IT-handling skills, particularly among children and young people. The nature of the centres also changed. Initially they were places where professionals, or people trained in basic information skills, used the technology to acquire process

and store information on behalf of the community and its members. Gradually a self-service style of operation began to emerge: people went to the centres to use the technology to satisfy their own information needs. The Indian Government, for example, has done much to support the development of telecentres in rural areas. In 2000 it launched a programme for establishing nearly 500 centres in the northeastern region of the country. Each was equipped with computers, printers, a generator and a satellite link for internet access. The centres are staffed by two trained operators and have the potential to be used for a very wide range of activities (Harris and Rajora, 2006). However, resource limitations and other constraints, such as the time and cost involved in maintaining equipment, meant that the centres in developing countries such as Zimbabwe were faced with a lot of problems.

Multipurpose Community Telecentres

Multipurpose Community Telecentres reflected the way that technological change, particularly the development of the internet, had greatly extended the range of activities that could be undertaken by telecentres. It is now the most common type of centre, and examples can be found in South Africa, Botswana, and the Asia-Pacific region, as well as in more developed European and North American countries. The primary driver was to provide opportunities for the community to use ICT for a wide range of purposes, not just as a means of acquiring, processing and storing information. The centres were often built around training in the use of the internet, computers and associated technology. Some seek to provide services to the whole community (Proenza et al., 2001); others have focused on particular groups within the community, such as women (International Telecommunication Union, 2004). The centres were increasingly initiated by community-based organisations and supported by a wide range of national, regional and local government agencies, along with sponsorship from private sector companies and charitable donations.

In other cases, the centres have been established by an outside agency that has sponsored the development in order to benefit a community for example *US information corner* in Zimbabwe. Good examples of this are the centres that have been established by the Population and Community Development Association (PDA) of Thailand. The centres are equipped with computers, printers, along with an internet connection. The main purpose of the centres is to provide training in computing and the use of ICT. They offer a range of courses for the community and for local organisations. The centres also, however, serve as a community facility, and members of the community are encouraged to use the equipment. At an international level, the International Telecommunication Union and UNESCO have played an important role in promoting the concept of multipurpose community telecentres. UNESCO has produced a useful, practical guide to their establishment and operation (UNESCO, 2003).

Community Multi-media Centres

The functions of community based information and technology centres have changed over time: from community libraries, with their emphasis on building collections of books, to the multipurpose community telecentres, where information and communication technology is used for a wide variety of purposes. Since 2000, a further function has been added – community broadcasting. A community multimedia centre “combines local radio by local people in local languages with a public telecentre facility offering access to internet, e-mail, computer training and a range of services and activities that meet development needs” (UNESCO, 2005). In some cases, telecentres were added to community radio stations; in others, radio was added to existing telecentres. This development reflects the emergence of new opportunities to use digital information and associated media to disseminate information. Digital technology enables local people in small, remote communities to take control of the local, regional, national and even international information that they receive, customizing it to meet their particular requirements. Content of all types can be relayed in local languages to meet local needs.

Community Learning Centres

In recent years, with the growth of the internet and the transition to information and knowledge-based societies, people have become more and more conscious of the importance of learning and knowledge as a basis for individual, community, economic and social development. Community information and technology centres have always contributed, in one way or another, to this process. In recent years, however, a number of community learning centres have been established with the specific purpose of providing a variety of learning opportunities that can empower people within a community and improve their quality of life (UNESCO, 2006). UNESCO has done much to foster the development of community learning centres under its Programme of Education for All. The centres reflect recognition of the importance of non-formal, lifelong learning and the development of skills. The centres provide support for children and young people moving through the formal education system, but they also make significant provision for adult and continuing learners. Community learning centres are increasingly initiated by community-based organisations and supported by a wide range of national, regional and local government agencies, particularly education ministries, and by UNESCO.

Purposes of community based information centres

The common purpose that underlies all the community based information centres is to achieve equality of access to information; or, at least, to reduce levels of inequality. The importance of information has grown in recent years with the transition to information- and knowledge-based communities. The purpose is to provide community development information and business services to remote communities. CIBCs will provide access to: Internet-enabled computers, development of online community software based on the local information needs, Fax machines, Printers, Copiers, Telephones, Television and Radios. In addition there will be an adjoining library with books and daily newspapers and magazines in rural Zimbabwe communities these will act as gateways to information on daily activities. Community based information centres have one thing in common: they bring new learning opportunities to those who are otherwise left to lag behind in the increasingly wired world.

Furthermore, lack of access to information can severely constrain personal development through education. It can impair the efficiency and competitiveness of businesses, whether those of subsistence farmers or more ambitious entrepreneurs. It can limit a community's cultural life, leading to poverty of experience and narrowness of vision. Perhaps most significant of all, it can prevent individuals from taking control of their daily lives, their health and their well-being, as well as from exercising their rights as citizens (Sullivan 2006).

The importance of information has grown in recent years with the transition to information- and knowledge-based communities. This is a phenomenon that can be seen all over the world. The development of these information-based societies holds out the prospect of economic growth and social improvement but, all too often, it produces within the overall population disadvantaged groups who are excluded because they lack access to information. Societies are becoming polarized into those who have access to information – the information-haves – and those who do not – the have-nots. This situation is usually compounded by a digital divide where people lack access to the technology that, increasingly, is required in order to obtain and use information.

The more individuals, communities and whole societies depend on information and the associated technologies, the greater is the social exclusion that is experienced by those who do not have access to the technology and the wherewithal to use it. As if this were not bad enough, matters are made worse by the tendency for educated people and those with skills to leave the disadvantaged communities and move to the cities rural urban migration. In effect, this increases the social and technological exclusion for those who remain. In Zimbabwe There is, therefore, a great need to reduce the level of inequality in people's access to information. In the same vain by the creation of community-based centres that are designed to provide people with access to information. Such centres have been established in disadvantaged communities all over the world – they are a global phenomenon.

The Zimbabwean rural populace benefits

Information and communication activities are a fundamental element of any rural development activity. Rural areas are often characterized as information-poor and information provision has always been a central component of rural development initiatives. The rural poor typically lack access to information vital to their lives and livelihoods (Chapman and Slaymaker, 2002). Zayed et al. (1997) suggest that:

[. . .] in a country like Bangladesh with an agro-based rural economy, rural development can play a major role in national development. Therefore, quick and easy access to information is vital to the development of the rural community.

The flow of information from and to the rural based communities is an essential pre-condition for the development of rural Zimbabwe towards eradication of widespread poverty. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) greatly facilitate the flow of information and knowledge offering the socially-marginalized and unaware community unprecedented opportunities to attain their own entitlements (Akbar, 2004). As a result, urban people are benefiting from the new ICT-based economy, but the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized rural population does not have access to the information superhighway. They are far away from the reach of their desired information. Owing to unavailability of infrastructure in Zimbabwe, effective isolation and some other problems, people living in rural areas cannot afford to have these facilities. However, help is possibly at hand with the establishment of community based information centres as a way to enable rural communities to use modern inventions for their development (Mahmood, 2005).

In Zimbabwe the idea is to establish thousands telecentres throughout the country so that all citizens of the country would have access to communication, information and other services for improving their livelihoods and quality of life. These telecentres, once established in rural areas, will provide a range of services focused on the needs of rural residents and will bring profound impact on rural life that include creating social awareness, eradicating poverty, empowering women, opening the door of financial activities and eliminating digital divide. As a result, the underprivileged and marginalized people living in the remote areas would be immensely benefited from these initiatives.

Conclusion

Creating awareness through provision of information products and services to the rural people should become an essential component for development. It seems that rural people in Africa are not always aware of what information entails as propounded by (Manzvanzvike 1993; Rosenberg 1993). Economic development in Zimbabwe can only be achieved by harnessing these information synergies and uplifting the rural based traditional information centres. Information (or knowledge) is power; however, information by itself is worthless and cannot solve problems there is need to find links to various information based websites which can equip the rural people with markets for their products, money transfer, job applications and weather information. Information has power only when used and applied effectively. Information plays such an important role in almost every human activity; its value in the development process has been a topic of extensive debate. Community based information centres are therefore a panacea to national development combined with proper use of information.

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