



Date : 30/06/2008

"Conquering Barriers - The Politics of Information: Communication, Collaboration, and Content"

Hindering Factors to Access and Usage of Government Libraries in Kenya

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Meeting: 165 Government Libraries
Simultaneous Interpretation: Not available

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL

10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>

Abstract

A library is a collection of information, sources, resources, and services: it is organized for use and maintained by a public body, an institution, or a private individual.

Government libraries are repositories and access points to government information in both print and non print media. They focus mainly on policy and government documents that have been produced, processed, stored, retrieved/distributed for economic, political and social use by government departments/ministries for policy making.

In Kenya, most government libraries are run and managed by parliamentary committees and funded by the government, special programmes such as the Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and non-governmental not-for-profit making organizations. Examples of government libraries in Kenya include the parliament library, the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Center and all ministry and departmental libraries as created by the Government of Kenya.

Government libraries as a resource remain largely inaccessible and unexplored in Kenya.

This paper intends to look at major hindering factors to the growth, access and usage of these libraries. They include limited access and usage of the information/documents, target user group, classified information, and classification of government information, poor information communication technologies (ICT), infrastructure, inadequate ICT skills, and poor remuneration

It concludes with way forward, suggestions and recommendations.

Introduction

Government libraries

A government library is a library maintained out of central government funds as repositories and access points to government information in both print and non-print media. In Kenya, government libraries fall in three main categories: national libraries, departmental libraries and research stations. Examples of these libraries are Kenya National Archives, Libraries of government research stations, government research stations, government training institutions, high court of Kenya, parliament library, industrial information centers and libraries serving the ministries. The Kenya National Library services falls under the Ministry of Gender, Culture, Sports and Social Services.

The printed output of information from the government offices is referred to as a *Government Document*. These are publications or any printed matter originating or printed by the authority of any office of a legally organized government body. Government documents/publications are from ministries and departments, local governments (councils), judiciary, parastatal organizations, commissions and government education institutions. They contain very important information on legal matters, education, agriculture, economics, health and environment. (Shibanda, 2006)

In Kenya, access and use of government information is facilitated by legal instruments. These legal instruments include the Kenya National Development Plan, the Kenya Gazette Supplement, and the Legal Deposit Act (1987)

Examples of Government Libraries

Examples of government libraries as per the three major categories (national libraries, departmental libraries and research stations) include:

1. Kenya National Library Services (Acts as a National Library)

The Kenya National Library Services (KNLS) fell under the Ministry of Gender, Culture, Sports and Social Services during the ninth parliament (2002-2007). It is now run by a board that is affiliated with the Central Government through the Ministry responsible for Social Services. The Board is answerable to the Government of Kenya through the Ministry.

Some of the core functions of KNLS include to:

- Promote, establish, equip, manage, and maintain library services in Kenya
- Publish the National Bibliography of Kenya and to provide bibliographical and reference services
- Engage the community and other stakeholders in the development of libraries
- Advice the government, local authorities and other public bodies on all matters relating to library documentation and related services.

Currently, the Board is responsible for managing 23 libraries spread throughout the country. They are categorized into Provincial, District, and Divisional libraries. These libraries share a common goal – to meet the information needs of all citizens.

2. Parliament library (Department library)

The Kenya parliament library is run by a committee that comprises members of parliament. The library aims at availing information (print and non-print) to meet the information needs/wants and requirements of the parliament, ministers and parliamentary staff through the provision of relevant information resources.

The parliament library of Kenya is a member of The Association of Parliamentary Libraries of Eastern and Southern Africa (APLESA) that was founded in Harare, Zimbabwe, in October 1994. Other members include Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The association among other activities discusses the role of parliamentary libraries in multi-party states with special emphasis on the need to provide timely, up-to-date and accurate information.

3. The Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service (KNA&DS) (research institute library)

The Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service was officially established the Public Archives and Documentation Service Act of 1965.

KNA& DS Mission

To preserve valuable public records as part of the information resources of the Republic of Kenya, and to make them accessible to present and future generations. To fulfill this mission, the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service continue to:

- Advise public offices on proper records management
- Select valuable records for permanent preservation as archives
- Store and preserve archives in the repositories
- Publicize availability of information resources in our custody through computerization of indexes, digitization, World Wide Web; and through use of other communications and information technologies
- Promote access to public records and archives for reference and research purposes, or just for leisure and enjoyment.

KNA&DS provides efficient and expanded services to public offices whose records are in their custody, to research scholars, and to the ordinary citizens.

Types of collections – Government libraries

Government information is not only crucial in the development of any nation but its availability is a basic right for each citizen in a democracy (Kamar & On'gondo, 2007). Collection strengths in government libraries include development plans, census materials, central bank reports, and statistical compendia. Others include legislation, statement of government policy, debate on current topics of importance, reports of

government sponsored research, official histories and statistical data. (Shibanda, 2006).

Management, Support and Running of Government Libraries

Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD)

IGAD project was launched in Kenya in October 1999 after a survey of several government libraries and documentation centers in the country. The idea of the project was to strengthen libraries and documentation services in IGAD member states. Initially, a total of 14 institutions representing different government libraries and documentation centers were represented at the launching ceremony at Kenyatta International Conference Centre (K.I.C.C.), Kenya.

The aim of the project is to improve the availability, accessibility and quality of information within the IGAD sub-region. The main purpose is to allow for the systematic identification, collection processing and retrieval of recorded information by skilled information personnel at the national level and to promote the sharing and exchange of information at a regional level.

Hindering Factors

Limited access and usage of the information/documents

Access to government information is limited by patronage and accessibility. Patronage here refers to the members of the parent ministry and not actual consumers (general public/citizens). A major limiting factor is the remote geographical location of many of the libraries.

Target user group

Ideally, government libraries are meant to serve all citizens whenever and wherever they are regardless of distance and geographical location. This is not the case; target user groups are drawn from staff from the library of the parent department/ministry.

Barriers to be Conquered

Kenya has an uneven distribution of internet facilities. The high cost of connection and in some cases low penetration of high-speed of connectivity to the internet connection to government libraries is not equal. The critical issues with respect to ICT are low fixed network penetration, especially outside Nairobi and non-urban areas; limited capacity of both dedicated and dial up internet links, poor quality of the local access network, inadequate independence of the communications regulator, lack of ICT standards, inappropriate legislative framework to implement e-governance and lack of ICT policies (CAFRAD, 2005).

Poor remuneration

Poor pay to civil servants by the government of Kenya has led to poor performance in terms of service delivery. Unmotivated staff sees no need to acquire new skills. This has affected staff performance in terms of organization and dissemination of government information. According to Kamar (2006), most of the people working for the government sector in Kenya get neither a 'carrot' nor a 'stick', that is they are not rewarded for excellent work nor are they punished or held accountable for not performing satisfactorily.

Classified information

In Kenya, government information is classified mainly into four categories. According to Kamar (2006), government information is classified as per classification system put in place by the generating ministry/department, but generally classified into: 1. Secret – remain in creating ministry/department. The public does not have access to them; 2. Top secret- their access by the public is dictated by the creating Ministry/department; 3. Confidential – those with a need to know and a security clearance; and 4. Public records. This type of classification has created a legalistic obstruction to the flow of information and, as a result, the citizens cannot get open access to a lot of information that they need.

Some of the problems with classifying government information that leads to information secrecy includes:

1. **Enhanced corruption.** Inaccessibility to government information enhances corruption due to lack of audit systems that act as check and balances on existing government structures;
2. **Robs citizens of their fundamental human rights.** Citizens have a fundamental right to access information generated by the government in whatever format, size, and shape; whenever and wherever they are regardless of language;
3. **Creates unwarranted fear among citizens and distrust between the Government and its citizens (the governed).**

Citizens have a right to information generated by the government as a means of enhancing knowledge.

Low information literacy level

Low information literacy level can be equated to information illiteracy. This is the inability to recognize an information need or even to link the available information to a particular information need. It can also be referred to as the inability to evaluate information contained and apply it appropriately to meet an information need.

Kamar (2006), states that the low level of literacy and the absence of a reading culture have contributed to low information literacy levels. She further eludes that, with low literacy level, a sizable proportion of Kenyans cannot access government information because they cannot read in spite of available infrastructure such as the public libraries

(coordinated and stocked by the Kenya National Library Services) and community libraries that provide government information.

Although a good percentage of Kenyans have basic literacy skills in their vernacular language, most government information is available mainly in English, the country's official language. This is a major hindering factor to usage of government information available in government libraries throughout the rural sector.

Conclusion

Government libraries play a very vital role in the storage, organization and dissemination of government information for usage by all citizens. There is need to stock all government libraries with government generated information at all levels (provisional, district and down to the grass roots for effective decision making among all citizens.

Recommendations

1. The introduction of E-Government is going to play a big role on service delivery within the library. With this in place a range of information technologies, such as the Wide Area Networks, the internet, and mobile computing, will be used to transform the library's operations.
2. Translate information available in government libraries from English into the vernacular languages.
3. Information repackaging – Government libraries should repackage information into video/audio. Repackaged information may then be disseminated during village talks (*barazaa's*).

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