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AIDS and Culture: The Case for an African Information Identity

Abstract:

The library and information profession in Africa is not well recognized. It does not carry an identifiable set of core activities that share a common understanding across societies in Africa. The number of libraries in Africa is limited for a variety of reasons including lack of resources, populations that are not based in print literacy, and having its roots in the British model of librarianship.

HIV/AIDS continues to pose severe problems for Sub-Saharan Africa. Some countries in the region have successfully reduced the number of HIV/AIDS cases, citing information as the main source of prevention, presenting library and information professionals a unique opportunity to collectively organize and establish their role in the fight against the disease. This paper will discuss the opportunity for how LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities can develop and strengthen a positive status for the library and information discipline in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Agenda

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- Relevant publications:

    – Albright, Kendra S. Information Vaccine: HIV/AIDS and Libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Seidelin, S. and T.S. Jensen (Eds.), *Libraries and the Fight Against HIV/AIDS, Poverty, and Corruption*. World Report Series Vol. VI. The Hague, Netherlands: International Federation of Library Associations, 29-42, 2006.

    – Albright Kendra S. and Kigongo-Bukenya, Isaac. Libraries and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa: Realities of Culture and Curriculum, Proceedings of the 69th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science & Technology, November 3-8, 2006, Austin, Texas. Silver Spring, MD: ASIS&T, Vol, 43, 2006.

Introduction

Libraries in most industrialized countries provide services that are recognized by the public as contributing to the overall good of society. Public monies are made available to fund, either in whole or in part, the development and maintenance of public libraries. Librarianship is a well-established, recognized profession that carries a common perception of its related services. More recently, librarianship, when joined with information and communication technologies, is transformed into information work and those who participate in this profession are often referred to as information professionals or a related title. Together, library and information science (LIS) professionals constitute a profession and conduct activities that are widely recognized.

LIS professionals also have an important role to play in Sub-Saharan Africa. They provide access to valuable information and knowledge that can contribute to the solution of social problems. They help to "advance knowledge sharing, preservation of local knowledge and content, indigenous languages, content management and development, access to the Internet, and many other information concerns which are indispensable to ensuring the acquisition of knowledge by Africans" (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2006). Libraries also provide information to people through the "collection, acquisition and dissemination of books, journals and other materials" (Rosenberg, 2002).

The LIS profession in Africa, however, faces challenges to the provision of effective services that are specific to their own Sub-Saharan cultures. Barriers from external sources (e.g., a legacy of LIS education that is rooted in the British tradition) and internal limitations (e.g., limited resources, weak management) have restricted the growth and recognized value of the LIS profession in Sub-Saharan Africa.

There are many fewer libraries per capita in Sub-Saharan Africa compared with those in the industrialized nations. Because societies in SSA are steeped in oral culture, libraries are not perceived as necessary. Librarianship is perceived as a low status profession with a poor image (Tsigemelak, 2006; Batambuze, 2005), and remains loosely defined and not clearly recognized (Mchombu, 1991). Tsigemelak (2006) adds that because of the apathetic perspective towards libraries in Africa, "African governments have lost enthusiasm for

library service" (3). Librarianship evolved from its colonial roots which became the basis for LIS training and practice in Africa. With additional influence from the U.S., these Western roots have yielded a profession trained for an elitist print (and now digital/electronic) culture but operating in one that is predominantly based in oral tradition. Amadi (1981) asserts that while American libraries exist to meet the needs of Americans, and British libraries exist for the British, African libraries do not offer services that meet the needs of Africans.

Despite these problems, the demand for LIS graduates is increasing (Mambo, 2000). LIS education programs have proliferated, including those in Namibia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, Botswana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and South Africa since the initial establishment of the East Africa School of Librarianship in Uganda in the early 1960s. Raseroka (1994) reported that LIS training in Sub-Saharan Africa doubled with the addition of South Africa. The demand appears to be greatest for graduates with Bachelor's degrees, although postgraduate studies are increasingly common (Albright, 2005). For example, Makerere University started a doctoral program with four students in its initial cohort in 2005 (Kigongo-Bukenya 2005).

There remains, however, no official reporting mechanism for tracking the graduates of these programs (Ocholla and Bothma, 2006). Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these graduates are working in HIV/AIDS information activities across a variety of settings including community centres, documentation and tele-centres, and non-governmental organizations involved in AIDS information, education and communication (IEC) activities (Albright, 2005). Because information is critical to the fight against HIV/AIDS and is necessary for preventing its spread, LIS professionals are uniquely positioned to meet this need. These professionals who are engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities have the opportunity to develop and strengthen a positive perception of the LIS discipline in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Status of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 10% of the world's population, but has over 63% of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in the world (Figure 1). Seventy-two percent of the estimated 2.1

million AIDS-related deaths worldwide in 2006 were in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS/WHO, 2006).
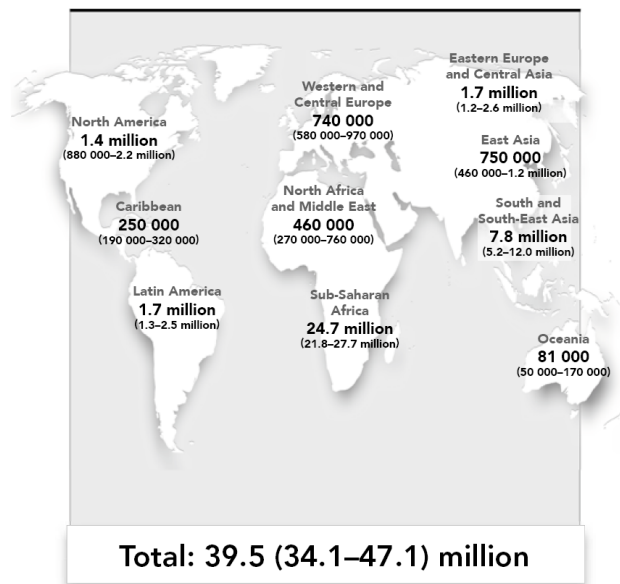

Total: 39.5 (34.1–47.1) million

Fig. 1 Adults and Children Estimated to be Living with HIV/AIDS (Source: UNAIDS/WHO, 2006)

Eighty-seven percent (330,000) of the 380,000 children who died of AIDS-related causes in 2006 were in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite intervention efforts, the numbers of new HIV infections are roughly equivalent to the number deaths from AIDS each year. However, several countries in Africa have successfully reversed the prevalence of the disease, with information, education, and communication (IEC) cited as the primary means of prevention (Green, 2003). Uganda has been credited with the greatest success in curbing the spread of the disease, and praised for its multi-sectoral, IEC strategy implemented by President Museveni in the early years of the disease (Albright and Kawooya, 2004; Albright and Kawooya, 2005).

There is no vaccine or cure for HIV or AIDS. Information is all that we have and is therefore, critical in efforts targeted at preventing the spread of the virus. Through widespread information about HIV/AIDS, the people of Sub-Saharan Africa can gain the knowledge needed to change their behavioural response to the AIDS epidemic. LIS professionals are trained in the collection, organization, management, storage, retrieval, and dissemination of information and have the tools to be particularly instrumental in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts. However, the LIS profession faces barriers to this service that must first be addressed.

Barriers to the LIS Profession in Sub-Saharan Africa

The problems facing the LIS profession in Africa are many. Problems stem from a combination of social characteristics including oral tradition, varying rates of print literacy, a limited understanding of the specific information needs of people of Sub-Saharan Africa societies, and limited resources. At times, the need for libraries seems questionable, at best.

Mchombu (1991) identified the primary problems facing librarianship in Africa, grouping them into two categories; those that are external challenges for libraries in Africa and those that are internally-focused. External challenges are those that are "derived from the hostile social environment within which libraries exist in Africa" (Mchombu, 1991, 186). These are the problems that professionals themselves identified as the barriers to African librarianship.

Internally-focused challenges address those issues that are caused by the "structural decoupling of libraries in Africa from their key user target groups, and the development of an inward-looking mentality which tends to glorify internal processes at the expense of maximizing use of library resources" (Mchombu, 1991, 188).

The combined framework will be used to analyze ways in which LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities can develop and strengthen a positive status for the LIS discipline in Sub-Saharan Africa. Each of the issues will be examined in light of opportunities for the LIS profession to respond within the context of HIV/AIDS information.

External Challenges

A list of external challenges identified by Mchombu (1991) is presented in Table 1. Each of these challenges is addressed below from the perspective of LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS activities.

African readers have not yet developed a reading habit.

Many people in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot read. It does not, however, mean that they are incompetent

External Issues
1. African readers have not yet developed a reading habit.
2. Africa's oral culture and authoritarian transmission of knowledge does not favour the development of libraries.
3. Governments and decision makers do not fully support libraries, in particular they have failed to institute and legislate national information policies.
4. African governments lack the notion of information as an important factor and strategy in the process of national development.
5. Over-sensitivity of governments in Africa to critical information, hence frequent attempts to block access to certain categories of information.
6. A low level of informatization of the African society, and overall low competence and propensity in incorporating large amounts of innovative information into the goods and services being produced.
7. Illiteracy rates are too high to enable people, particularly in rural areas and urban shanty-townships, to appreciate use of libraries.
8. Students read only to pass examinations after which they stop reading.
9. The book industry has failed to supply sufficient materials in indigenous languages.
10. The economic recession in African countries has made it very difficult for libraries to obtain adequate funding and often there has been a complete freeze on foreign exchange allocations

Table 1 External Challenges for Librarianship in Africa (based on Mchombu, 1991)

or lacking in the ability to understand. Literacy takes many forms; oral tradition is a form of literacy that allows for the rapid transmission of information throughout local communities. LIS professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa involved in HIV/AIDS information activities are well-positioned to tap into the local community oral network, utilizing the existing form of communication to quickly spread accurate, relevant, useful information. LIS professionals can interact and engage with local communities, building trust while furthering the spread of critical information. Concurrently, these professionals can establish reading programs that are specifically targeted to the needs of the communities they serve using culturally-appropriate techniques to foster reading skills (e.g., reading tents, mobile libraries).

Africa's oral culture and authoritarian transmission of knowledge does not favour the development of libraries.

Several approaches can be used to address the problem of library development. Instead of assuming a print-based approach to librarianship, the incorporation of oral culture into the practice of LIS work can expand and transform the notion of librarianship into something that is decidedly African. Partnerships with other institutions can be

made to facilitate this transformation. For example, radio and drama are two primary means by which

AIDS information is transmitted (Albright, Kawooya, and Hoff, 2006). LIS professionals can partner with media (e.g., radio) to develop effective AIDS information campaigns for the local community. LIS professionals can also team with educational institutions to develop targeted educational programs for AIDS information. These partnerships can build and expand the professional identity for LIS professionals.

Governments and decision makers do not fully support libraries, in particular they have failed to institute and legislate national information policies.

The LIS profession has a tremendous challenge to establish their professional identity in such a way as to garner support from the government and other societal institutions. Partnerships like those listed above will help to increase the visibility of the profession. In addition, as the role of LIS professionals in the prevention of HIV/AIDS is more highly recognized, these professionals will have increasing opportunities to participate in decisions regarding information policies.

African governments lack the notion of information as an important factor and strategy in the process of national development.

The reduction of HIV/AIDS in several of the Sub-Saharan countries (e.g., Uganda, Botswana,

Senegal) has demonstrated the importance of information in creating social change. Similar changes may be possible through the targeted design of information campaigns for issues of national development. LIS professionals have an opportunity to collectively organize their engagement in AIDS information activities and create more visibility for the profession. Concurrently, the rise of the profession will also increase awareness of the importance of information in national development.

Over-sensitivity of governments in Africa to critical information, hence frequent attempts to block access to certain categories of information.

LIS professionals are in a unique position to address freedom of information issues. HIV/AIDS information activities are only one area where the LIS profession can promote the free flow of information, thus lowering the barriers to information access. This is another area where partnerships between LIS professionals and media (e.g., print and broadcast journalists) can facilitate access to vital information, particularly in the case of HIV/AIDS.

A low level of informatization of the African society, and overall low competence and propensity in incorporating large amounts of innovative information into the goods and services being produced.

With the record number of graduates from LIS programmes throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, there is an increasing number of people trained in the use of new technologies, including those that are well-deployed within the region. The idea of informatization need not be limited to computers; rather, it should be viewed broadly and can include mobile telephony and radio, two very widely adopted technologies in Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, information can be easily transmitted to those with mobile telephones through text messages. LIS professionals can utilize these technologies in the provision of all types of information, including HIV/AIDS. Further, LIS professionals can be deployed as community resources to integrate computers and other technologies into local communities. It must be cautioned, however, that maintenance of new technologies must be supported in order to be effective over time.

Illiteracy rates are too high to enable people, particularly in rural areas and urban shanty-townships, to appreciate use of libraries.

The notion of libraries is often applied to Africa from a limited perspective represented by an outdated definition proposed by UNESCO in 1970 as "any organized collection of printed books and periodicals or of any other graphic or audio-visual materials, and the services of a staff to provide and facilitate the use of such materials as are required to meet the informational, research, educational or recreational needs of its users." The emphasis is on a print and audio-visual collection and does not represent the incorporation of newer digital technologies that are widely incorporated into western LIS practice. Can Africa not create its own variation of librarianship by incorporating more appropriate technologies for its own cultures? Again, the inclusion of oral communications (e.g., radio, drama) within the context of African information practice could lead to a greater appreciation for and use of libraries. HIV/AIDS information programmes would be a useful starting point for developing an African concept of library.

Students read only to pass examinations after which they stop reading.

HIV/AIDS information programmes that incorporate oral communications could possibly facilitate increased interest and use of LIS activities. Through increased involvement of the public, LIS professionals can expand programmes to include reading activities. In partnership with educational institutions, reading programmes can be designed to support school-related activities, including examinations. They can also be designed to facilitate the enjoyment of reading. Partnerships can also provide access to additional reading materials through inter-lending agreements and expanded access to other collections.

The book industry has failed to supply sufficient materials in indigenous languages.

Western publishers are cautious about publishing African materials and those in indigenous languages because of the limited market for these materials. Further, African authors and organizations often make materials available for local distribution only (Sturges and Neill 1997). There are also concerns that giving away their indigenous knowledge to publishing companies in the industrialized countries will not result in economic rewards or incentives for

African authors (Kawooya 2005). There is a substantial amount of HIV/AIDS research in the grey literature of Sub-Saharan Africa. LIS professionals are trained in the management of grey literature, and should assume some leadership in negotiating the terms and conditions for making this information more widely available.

The economic recession in African countries has made it very difficult for libraries to obtain adequate funding and often there has been a complete freeze on foreign exchange allocations.

The economic recession in Sub-Saharan Africa has been compounded by the devastation caused by HIV/AIDS. More than ever, it is necessary for LIS professionals to utilize their skills in targeting information to prevent the spread of the disease. LIS professionals must pursue positions of leadership in HIV/AIDS information activities in order to raise the awareness of their professional value and increase their visibility.

Internal Challenges

A list of the internally-focused challenges identified by Mchombu (1991) is presented in Table 2. These challenges are addressed below from the perspective of LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS activities.

The historical legacy of colonialism and its impact on librarianship

There are a number of issues involved in the impact of colonialism on African librarianship. Reviewing the British model of library training in Sub-Saharan Africa, Batambuze (2005) suggests that it was geared towards creating a market for British publications in Africa. The outcome since then has been that African academics in LIS science "have failed to come up with an African LIS Hybrid. Therefore, the library profession is not perceived as particularly useful except by those who are already fairly educated."

Currently, library responses to this are slowly building towards an identity of an African LIS profession. In particular, the same creative and innovative approach to sources and services is found in HIV/AIDS information activities offered by libraries.

Internal Issues
1. The historical legacy of colonialism and its impact on librarianship.
2. The belief that information seeking behaviour of Africans was identical to those of library users in Europe and North America.
3. The emphasis on tending to documents rather than users.
4. The ability of librarians to incorporate the integration of optimum information to its parent organization.
5. The need to create African materials (i.e., to facilitate an African publishing industry) rather than relying on book donations from the U.S. and Western Europe.
6. Matching the information needs of Africans with African materials.
7. Weak library management and leadership based, in part, on the poor quality of training in LIS programs abroad and at home.

Table 2 Internally-Focused Challenges for Librarianship in Africa (based on Mchombu, 1991)

The belief that information seeking behaviour of Africans was identical to those of library users in Europe and North America.

There has been a fair amount of research on the information seeking behaviour of Africans. In many cases, it has been realized that there are clear differences in information seeking between the way that African seek information and those in European and North American libraries. For example, Mchombu (1996) conducted a study of information needs in rural Tanzania, Botswana, and Malawi in which 50% of the participants did not perceive that they had any information needs. He found that this perception depends upon the way in which they are asked about their information needs. They were more likely to articulate their information needs if they were explicitly linked to their reality, to "what

was going on around them" (78). Merely asking them what information they needed was not useful in drawing out their information needs. The concept of information needs is more explicit to library users in North America and Europe. LIS professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa who work with HIV/AIDS information often encounter users whose information needs can be more easily articulated. Therefore, this is an excellent area for examining the information seeking behaviour specific to Africans in particular communities.

The emphasis on tending to documents rather than users.

African LIS professionals, being trained primarily in the British tradition, have learned to focus on managing the collection rather than placing their emphasis on the users. Libraries, therefore, have a very limited ability to serve the African population. LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities are often in direct contact with individuals who have a specific need for critical information. Professionals are sometimes required to go into the field to serve the information needs of these users and find that they must develop creative approaches to meet these needs.

The ability of librarians to incorporate the integration of optimum information to its parent organization.

LIS professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa, as elsewhere, reflect the mission of their parent organization. They are responsible for ensuring the acquisition and distribution of relevant materials to the parent body. Those professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities in Sub-Saharan Africa are uniquely positioned to assume a strong leadership role by identifying and selecting the most relevant materials for their parent organization.

The need to create African materials (i.e., to facilitate an African publishing industry) rather than relying on book donations from the U.S. and Western Europe.

African materials are needed to represent the specific realities for life in Africa. The political, economic, social, and cultural differences need to be reflected in materials developed specifically for Africa and its independent nations and communities. Materials published elsewhere, whether acquired through purchase or donation, cannot substantially address the particular needs of African societies.

Because the number of people living with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa is so much greater than anywhere else, there is a large body of indigenous materials that are produced on this topic. LIS professionals can facilitate the publication of these

materials by prioritizing and requesting these materials for their collections.

Matching the information needs of Africans with African materials.

The evidence is clear that there is a need for HIV/AIDS information in Sub-Saharan Africa. These materials should reflect research and cultural practices within the local communities that will be most likely to prevent the spread of the disease. By examining the specific HIV/AIDS information needs of Africans with materials that are responsive to the specific needs of Africans, there is a greater likelihood of successful prevention than by relying on outside sources.

Weak library management and leadership based, in part, on the poor quality of training in LIS programs abroad and at home.

Problems with LIS management and leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa are linked to problems that stem from the British model of librarianship (Benge, 1996). African LIS professionals trained under the British model learn to address the information needs of westerners and how to serve those cultures. What works in Northern Europe, for example, may not work in East Africa. More emphasis should be placed on training African LIS professionals within an African context of LIS practice. The role of information in the prevention of HIV/AIDS is an area that can promote the development of African LIS practice by incorporating the information needs of Africans into the African model of LIS education. An example is the creation of an AIDS information course module for postgraduate students at the East African School of LIS Science at Makerere University in Uganda. This course seeks to incorporate identifiable information needs of the local communities with reference to culturally appropriate sources and services.

Considerations for Sub-Saharan Africa

Several considerations emerge from the activities of LIS professionals involved in HIV/AIDS information

dissemination in Sub-Saharan Africa. These considerations can assist LIS professionals in overcoming the challenges identified above and utilizing the characteristics of indigenous culture to facilitate the provision of information through formats that are better suited to African societies (e.g., radio, drama, audiobooks). These include:

1. The scope of what is included in LIS practice in Africa should be broadened to include information sources outside the role of traditional libraries (e.g., community centres, mobile libraries), including those information activities related to HIV/AIDS. For example, information is commonly shared in community centres, youth centres, documentation centres, multipurpose telecentres, and centres. These centres serve as a community centre where local forums and meetings can be conducted, both formal and informal.

2. LIS practitioners must develop flexible HIV/AIDS programs designed to meet the specific needs of the African people. This includes encouraging the development and production of information products and services appropriate to the local community, addressing issues of language, delivery, and publishing. Materials should be designed specifically for a target audience. Because of the oral tradition, non-print materials should be widely used in conjunction with reading programmes.

3. The establishment of partnerships between libraries and other sources of HIV/AIDS information activities (e.g., educational institutions, the media). The value of HIV/AIDS information in prevention efforts is well recognized, and is increasingly at the core of policy and funding practices. LIS professionals should be involved in decision-making and policy setting regarding information practices related to HIV/AIDS. By partnering with other institutions, LIS professionals raise their visibility and potential role for affecting policy.

4. Review the LIS education curriculum in Sub-Saharan Africa. The incorporation of HIV/AIDS information activities would be useful to raise public awareness and increase the visibility of the profession. Coursework should include the characteristics of local culture, particularly oral tradition, and the information needs of local communities. Training should also address how to work in partnership with other organizations. Additionally, specialized training, possibly certification, in the unique HIV/AIDS information could be offered.

5. LIS educational programs should track the professional activities of their graduates, including where they find work, types of organizations that employee their graduates, etc. This will provide the necessary metrics to present an organized picture of the LIS profession throughout the region.

6. Library associations in Sub-Saharan Africa should develop a position statement regarding the profession's role in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Related projects should be developed and evaluated and the results should be widely publicized.

The combination of these activities will help to build the professional identity of the African LIS profession. LIS professionals working in HIV/AIDS information activities have an opportunity to lead the development of this identity.

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