

FACTORS AFFECTING UTILITY OF KEYS TO LIBRARIES' RESOURCES IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract: The authors give reasons for the growing inability to utilize some very important keys to resources known to the librarians because they are beyond means. The overall economic situation is of great (negative) influence. It affects the use of printed materials, information technology, as well as networking.

At present Zambia's economy is going through very hard times. The country is facing problems of lack of foreign exchange reserves, high inflation, heavy debt burden, unemployment, budget deficits and many other problems typical of developing countries.

Since the emergency of the first health sciences collection in Zambia (by then Northern Rhodesia) in the 1950s, dependance has been mainly on imported library resources in excess of 90%. This has been evident in the field of health sciences where there is only one erratic medical publication and less than five newsletters of limited circulation and uncertain continuity. Learned societies and professional associations have not lived to their expectations either as most of them are poorly organised or are in their infancy and hence not able to organized their work and research findings into meaningful library resources. The Ministry of Health Planning Unit does publish a number of health books, newsletters and pamphlets, but it lacks a well organised and coordinated distribution and sales system.

Being import oriented Zambia libraries faced no problems in acquiring the necessary resources when the national economy was sound because it was easy to use all the necessary keys available to them. A good testimony to this is the diverse health sciences library collections whose sources cut across the globe, but only to be severely cut down in the 1980s when the economy sank deeper into the problems already mentioned.

Keys to Resources known to a Zambian Professional Librarian and their Availability

Human Resources

It takes qualified staff to understand the main objectives of any library, to know what is expected of them, to know what resources are available to them locally and globally, and how to utilize the available resources.

It is in this respect that qualified staff in our respective health science libraries should be considered as one of the main keys to resources. Once qualified human resources are available, avenues to knowledge and possible utilization of other keys to resources are open. The situation in Zambia today in respect to human resources is relatively good. Zambia produces librarians with Bachelor of Arts degree and diplomas from the University of Zambia. Post graduate studies at present are mainly done in the United Kingdom and United States.

The efforts of the University of Zambia in the supply of human resources are supplemented with a certificate training course in library studies which is offered by the Posts and Telecommunication Staff Training College. As such libraries with good financial backing and a good employment policy have enjoyed the services of qualified library staff as a key to resources.

Financial Resources

Because libraries in Zambia heavily depend on imported materials the question of money is prime, and not just money but money in convertible currencies. The country has very few publishers and booksellers and as a result imports more than 90% of national library materials. There are serious problems now in relation to this because over the past twenty years the Zambia economy has not been performing well and hence the following factors have characterized our economy:

- (i) Lack of adequate foreign exchange reserves
- (ii) Upward inflation of over 100% per annum
- (iii) Weakening local currency in relation to US Dollar and other international currencies.
- (iv) Rising international debt burden of over seven billion US Dollars, and
- (v) Government budget deficits.

Given this scenario the implication for health science libraries in Zambia is that they are sandwiched between two evil forces. The first being the deteriorating economy characterized by the above mentioned factors and whose resultant effects are falling

library budgets and a reduced buying power of our local currency in relation to international currencies. The second is that of escalating costs of library materials on the international market which is coupled with rising postal charges.¹

The end result for Zambian health sciences librarians has been the growing inability to utilize some very important keys to resources known to us because they are beyond means.

Information technology

Micro computers in Zambian libraries are in an introductory stage. A number of institutions are now using micro computers for various applications, which range from data analysis, stock inventories, research, etc. ... to bibliographic services.

However not many libraries in Zambia have their own micro computers but a number of them have access to institutions' micro computers. This small number of libraries that have acquired appropriate software are enjoying the benefits of information technology as another key to resources. Perhaps the introduction of the CD ROM and electronic mail technology has been one of the most welcome news for librarians in developing countries. It has made distances to world's renowned databases shorter, as this can now be delivered to our doorsteps.

Again not many libraries have acquired the CD ROM drives or are connected to electronic mail system yet, but the enthusiasm to acquire this new technology is just overwhelming. As the trend has been with computers we expect that the present price of acquiring CD-ROM technology will drop from the present figure of around \$8,000 to a lower figure and thus making it easier for more libraries to utilize this facility.²

Until 1991 to date Zambia had no direct link with any databases, but now steps are being taken to link up with some continental and regional databases. Though these databases may not necessarily be in health sciences, the steps being taken are in the right direction. Examples of these developments are:

- (i) Pan-African Documentation and Information systems (PADIS).³
- (ii) Pest Management Documentation and Information System and Service (PMDISS)⁴
- (iii) Regional Informatics Network for Africa.⁵
- (iv) SateILife - HealthNet. ⁶

The advantages that have come with these link-ups are time and cost savings, because we have been disadvantaged in that we send our search requests to libraries in Europe and United States to search on our behalf and send printouts to us. The process is long and costly in our region and is to some extent less efficient than the use of printed versions.

The use of audio-video texts, electronic mail, integrated automated information systems, and communication via satellites have been known to Zambian librarians for some time, but could not be introduced because of prohibitive costs. However, since the introduction of electronic mail in Zambia in 1991, the use of computers for communication has improved tremendously. By October 1993 there are 40 points connected to E-mail system in the country.⁶

Printed Materials

Use of printed source materials like indexes has been our most dependable key to resources and it still is. But unfortunately the trend now in Zambia is to drop subscription to such materials in preference to journals whenever libraries are faced with falling budgets.

In addition to journals stocked and indexed there is a sizeable amount of grey literature in the country, but this lies in a disorganised state and it is hard to lay hands on it as no single information centre seems to have an efficient way of locating and accessing them. A concerted effort is needed. Perhaps a legislation of a National Information Policy would help improve the situation.

Networking

Both formal and informal arrangements of resource sharing has proved to be a very valuable key, though a lot more needs to be done in this area. The major problems in this area are: high cost of photocopying; lack of photocopying facilities; lack of photocopy machine; spare parts; high postage rates; and lack of national union catalogues and serial holdings lists.

Computerised local, regional and continental networking has been hampered by non availability of computer facilities in most libraries and prohibitive telecommunication costs charged by the Posts and Telecommunications Corporation in the country. This has delayed on line resource sharing between libraries in Zambia.

Impact of the Availability or non Availability of Keys to Resources on Library Users and Personnel

Since Zambia's independence from the British colonial rule in 1964 there has been a remarkable increase in the countries literacy levels. In terms of higher education the number of university graduates has been an increase in the output of doctors, clinical officers, nurses and other paramedical staff. This being the case there is an increased demand for health information and expectations are quite high. However, the ability for Zambian health sciences librarian to satisfy the user is in most cases hindered by factors outlined earlier in this paper. Our user is always a disappointed one. Because of the same factors outlined above the effect of the morale of library staff is very low.⁷

Conclusion

It is hoped that if the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) succeeds, a reverse trend will improve the Zambian economy and rundown infrastructure including Library and Information centres will once more be well funded so that libraries would be able to utilize as many keys to resources as possible.

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