

INFORMATION LITERACY AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES IN A GLOBALLY DEPRESSED ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

Information literacy (IL) enhances the people's standards of living by empowering them to make informed decisions that could play a role in socio-economic development. Deprivation of information literacy can result in being sidelined because of lack of information, being reliant on others for one's knowledge and information needs and even severe deficits in the socio-economic status. An individual requires access to meaningful information daily, as it is a fundamental aspect for problem-solving, reliable decision making and fulfillment of one's developmental needs. Often, people from rural backgrounds bear the brunt of this unpleasant situation. The rural areas lack a strong economy and effective information systems; therefore, most of the people from these regions are not information literate. This paper focuses on the argument that rural communities can be empowered by endowing them with the appropriate information literacy. People from rural backgrounds need to develop their crucial and efficient information skills so that they can actively interact with global participants in the knowledge-based economy. Keeping this aspect in mind, this paper inspects the role of information literacy in the escalation of the socio-economic status and political advancement of the rural communities in the backdrop of a globally depressed economy. In addition, this paper features the importance of information literacy in fulfilling the evolving requirements of the rural masses, ascertains some of the basic hurdles faced while delivering information literacy to the rural population and endeavors to design methods to overcome the challenges.

KEYWORDS: Individual Requires, Knowledge and Information, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

In Africa (Africa is used as proxy), rural communities, which are the lion's share in the population in any country, have always been socio-economically poor and denied access to information. This stark reality can be well represented in the words of Chester & Neelameghan (2008) as cited in Kamba (2009), wherein they mention that rural communities in Africa represent the majority of the population; however, the majority of the people do not have access to fulfill their information and developmental requirements, thereby lagging behind in the development process and being unable to experience the advantages thereof of these resources. The right to information should be implemented in the lives of every individual from every walk of life. This would enable to improve their quality of living. With the availability of the overflow of information, people should be capable of segregating their specific information, which would fulfill their personal and business needs. The desire for personal growth and advancement is the major drive to achieve the aforementioned skills; in addition, the rapidly altering social, political, and economic environments of the African society also push the society towards the attainment of these skills. Furthermore, to be economically independent and to improve

one's quality of life, people need to be constantly updated with the relevant information. In this Information Age, it is of utmost importance that the rural communities bring about solutions to these realities, and thereby influence their socio-economic way of life and improve their chances to compete advantageously in a globally depressed economy.

Using information as a valuable tool, the rural communities can undo several of the enduring injustices concerning developmental disparities. People—as individuals and communities—need to be information literate to reach higher realms in life. Information literacy enables a person to identify one's information needs, as well as to uncover, assess, and efficiently employ the needed information. To upgrade a nation's population, information literacy must be integrated into the learning programs of that country, and the citizens need to develop an appreciation for the same. Governments need to lead the population in training them with the required skills so that they can effectively make use of the opportunities that arise in an informed society.

History, according to Kamba (2009), portrays that rural communities in Africa have always experienced a lack of relevant development, primarily because of the lack of information. In addition, the African governments and leaders failed to implement policies that could fill the gaps arising because of inefficient access to information. Consequently, the rural areas lack basic amenities such as water, food, education, health care, sanitation, information and security. Such a deprived society results in the people having reduced life expectancy and higher rates of infant mortality. Such circumstances increase the hardships of the rural dwellers. A major portion of the rural population migrates to urban areas in the hope of better prospects. With the influx into urban spaces, they attain employment in any trade for survival. Moreover, because information literacy is quite low in the rural populace, they are sidelined for employment as they lack information skills, are reliant on others to fulfill their knowledge and information needs and may even be victims of information anxiety. Information promotes meaningful development, in the absence of which, the future of the people is at stake, and no nation can progress into the modern era.

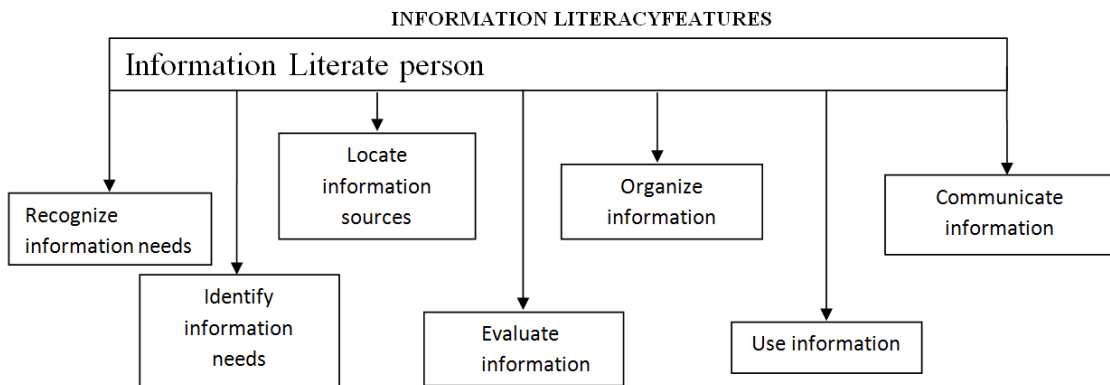
In this age of information and knowledge, empowerment of rural communities with information literacy is highly essential, not only to encourage lifelong learning, but also to decipher those areas of knowledge that they need to concentrate on as well as to develop teaching skills. To implement the information system effectively, they must develop the skills required to become independent, self-directed learners. Knowledge and information are significant for attaining meaningful development. The implementation of these aspects can bring about a revolution in the rural scene. The relevance of this revolution was highlighted by Balit (1996), as well as mentioned in Kamba (2009). They drew attention to the fact that for rural development, information was the least expensive input. Knowledge and information enable one to become self-reliant; in addition, these parameters are indispensable and assist in rural development, which can lead to a social and economic change. This paper highlights the positive role of appropriate information literacy, which will not only intensify and empower the progress of the rural communities, but also will make them become critical and effective information users. This revolution will enable the rural population to rise above their circumstances and actively contribute as global actors in the knowledge-based economy.

INFORMATION LITERACY—AN OUTLINE

Information literacy is fundamental in the quest of knowledge. According to Wesleyan's Librarians (2012), proficiency in information involves comprehending the situations that require information and being capable to competently identify its source, evaluate its authenticity, use it appropriately, and communicate the acquired information in

numerous formats. Individuals should also be equipped with the aptitude to steer ahead in the maze of information. Nowadays, there are an increasing number of information suppliers, with massive amount of data in every field. The sources of data include professional literature, popular media, libraries, the Internet, and much more. Most of this information is unfiltered, which brings to the forefront questions regarding its legitimacy, validity, and dependability. Until one understands how to sieve through this load of information to extract what one needs, this information overload is futile. Therefore, users need to use this medium effectively. To do so, one must become not only lifelong learners, but also comprehend on not just how to learn, but how to teach oneself. It is therefore highly necessary to equip oneself with the skills elementary in the process, and thereby become independent, self-directed learners. Information literacy should incorporate the skills to interpret and make informed judgments. In addition, the information literate individual should be capable of generating valid information, and thereby partake more efficiently in the growth of the society. Information literacy deals with the fostering of people’s critical *and* creative proficiencies.

INFORMATION LITERACY FEATURES



Source: Ode, 2014

Figure 1

INFORMATION LITERACY IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL GROWTH

Efficient information systems are central to any development program. This is also relevant for rural community development, wherein information plays an imperative role. Nyerere (1967) has also reinforced its importance by stating that, “While other countries in the world aim to reach the moon, we must aim for the time being at any rate to reach the villages by providing them with necessary information”. Information, if made accessible and is well propagated, has the power to eradicate poverty and ignorance. It has relevance in all consequences, and provides useful insights to attain economic, educational, social, political and cultural goals that are essential for the betterment of the entire community.

Information literacy is vital in enhancing the living conditions of the rural communities. Not only does information strengthen the nation in relation to its social, political, educational and economic development, but it also creates awareness and empowers its citizens. Information literacy is both an asset as well as a resource for of the improvement of communities, governments, agencies, and the population in focus. Aguolu (1989) has emphasized that information encompasses interrelated or structured data, which when applied appropriately would enable one to make the correct decisions in any scenario.

Currently, there is a digital divide between the urban and rural settings. Information literacy can fracture this digital divide and thereby uplift the rural populations by reducing poverty. In addition, this valuable tool registers economic growth. Several developed and some developing nations have noted the role of information literacy in the enhancement of the national gross domestic product (GDP). Providing access to this information literacy among the rural populace would make them active contributors of the information-based economy.

Information is power, and therefore an informed community has the potential to conquer any socio-economic stagnation and political dependence. Boon 1992 and Martin 1984 also share similar beliefs. However, information without the wisdom of effective application is futile and cannot resolve any problem. Information plays a vital part in every phase of human endeavor; therefore, its significance has been a matter of much debate. This draws attention to the fact that information is mandatory to the growth of any community. Economic and political growth of a nation is only possible if it arms itself with the weapon of information. Mchombu (1993, 2003), Dawha and Makinta (1993), Camble (1994) and others as cited by Komba (2009) have corroborated this fact. The rural communities in Africa have for ages struggled to make meaningful development because of incompetent information systems. This impact on the rural populace has an effect on the entire African nation, as most parts in these regions are underdeveloped. Both government and non-governmental organization (Kamba, 2009) have proved incapable of improving the living conditions in these regions as they have not concentrated on providing adequate and right information at the appropriate times to the rural communities.

Information enlightenment can break the shackles of ignorance, misconception, economic stagnation, social unrest and political instability. This indicates that if this crucial element were missing in an individual, he or she would stumble in all enterprises because of ignorance. Access to authentic information can remove the obstacles on the path of rural development. In addition, information literacy can increase the opportunities available for livelihood.

In every aspect of societal evolution, information has a long-standing responsibility. It can influence a wide range of areas of development, including education, policy making, research and development, personal requirements, business, decision-making and mass communications. Societal needs are also satisfied at different levels, from individuals to global communities within the formation. It is in this respect that Panos (1998) stated that “access to information is an essential condition for development”. In relation to this standpoint, information when engrained into the lives of the rural communities will eradicate poverty and ignorance, and provide useful insights to attain heights of economic, social, educational, political and cultural growth, which would gradually encompass the entire society.

In the current scenario, with the world growing leaps and bounds in information collection and distribution, information has attained the topmost status in influencing the growth of a nation. It is vital for the advancement of knowledge and is the basis for innovations. It is also an important asset for an informed citizen. This is the era of information explosion and economic depression. Mchombu (2003) has acknowledged that, “the contradiction between the vital role of information in development and its lack of official recognition in developing countries can hardly escape the attention of information specialists”.

Understandable, accessible information must be made available in rural areas to help resolve their day-to-day problems. Empowering the rural people with this information gives them an environment of security, achievement and control. Belshaw (1965) and McAnany (1978) put for the same opinion that for any community to operate proficiently and constructively, a fundamental standard supply of operational information is indispensable. Every society should acquire,

develop, accumulate, and trade this fundamental stock of information for survival. The assessment that information plays a predominant role in solving any society's economic and social issues, and therefore influences production, is now popularly acknowledged. Pradervand (1980: 56) has gone even asserted that information is the most fundamental of all basic needs. This is why community information is essential to not only improving the lifestyle of an individual, but also to primarily improve the society as a whole (Baruchson-Arbib 1996).

Information literacy is part of the basic privilege of every citizen Freedom of expression and the right to information is the fundamentals of any democracy and is contribute to nation building. Information literacy is mandatory for good governance and is a fundamental criterion for any positive policy implementation.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING INFORMATION LITERACY TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

Information is not efficiently available to rural communities of Africa. This has a major impact on the rural information services and their coordination. It is also a stumbling block for implementation of several rural development programmes. Some of the drawbacks in rural areas because of lack of information literacy are mentioned in the forthcoming paragraphs.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

Digital divide is the disparity in access to available information and communication technology (ICT). It is the gap between those who are “information haves” and those who are “information have-nots”. This unfairness in access to information has resulted in several social problems of discrimination (Tien & Fu, 2008:78). The digital divide has emerged as one of Africa’s primary economic and civil rights concerns. This inequality is an impending factor to the socioeconomic and political growth of the nation. The “information haves” are well informed regarding the existing state of affairs, whereas the “information have-nots” continue to wallow in their ignorance, and can never avail opportunities to escape their dire conditions.

LACK OF AWARENESS OF INFORMATION NEEDS AND IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION

The fact has been acknowledged that information providers and experts are not in touch with the information requirements of the rural population. Therefore, they do not concentrate on their needs when implementing any new policies or technology. However, incorporating the rural communities in Africa into this information boom is a prerequisite for development of the nation. The government and its agencies need to acknowledge the needs of the rural communities and re-orient the information services and activities to coordinate them with the information-seeking behaviour of the rural populace. Researchers such as Mchombu, (2003), Aina, (2006) and Correa (1997) have asserted the fact that rural communities in Africa are often not a part of the committees implementing government policies. Therefore, very often they are excluded in several developmental activities, because their interests are diverse from the urban populace, have lower literacy level, and their expertise and information for survival and development are not comprehended by those that have authority on the existing information flow. Planners, developers and governments are yet to recognize information as a fundamental element in nation building, or are ignorant of its potentialities.

LACK OF INFORMATION AND INFORMATION PROGRAMMES

African governments and leaders are largely responsible for the digital divide prevalent among the rural communities in Africa. History portrays that this divide has been artificially created by ignoring the development of rural areas and excluding them from developmental policies.. Consequently, according to Kamba (2009), rural communities are deficient of the fundamental requirements of living including water, food, education, health care, sanitation, information and security. These resource-poor settings have reduced the life expectancy in these regions with reports of high infant mortality. Even if information is dispersed among the rural communities, it is very much system oriented. Most of the rural dwellers are ignorant of advanced technology and therefore cannot comprehend and profit from it. They do not have a steady flow of information, as this network is disrupted by various other dependent factors. The information system is dependent on the availability, type of content, government interest, format and existing modes of delivery. These drawbacks are more prominent in developing countries like Africa, because their governments have failed to provide infrastructures and development policies to upgrade their living standards

INSUFFICIENT FUNDING

The information delivery service industry is capital intensive. Providing information to rural areas is generally not cost-effective. A lot of capital needs to be invested so that all individuals, irrespective of their circumstances, have access to effective and efficient information service delivery. Unfortunately, most of the African countries do not have the funding to handle the information delivery business. This is the main disadvantage that they face. In addition, there is inequality in policy implementation as African planners, developers and governments do not comprehend information as a fundamental resource. They have also failed to understand its vital potential. Consequently, they do not allocate funds to improve the information delivery services, which further create disparity in accessible information.

POOR POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The local and national governments have failed to implement effective information literacy policies. Few of the policies that have been initiated have not met with success as the policy makers usually lack insight of the information requirements of the rural populace. Policy makers cannot relate to the rural settings and therefore cannot comprehend the variation in information-seeking manners and the poor information services and information systems that the rural communities have. Furthermore, there are no policies that help to educate the rural dwellers so that they can optimise their skills to efficiently incorporate information for their day-to-day requirements. Therefore, prior to implementing any policy, it is advisable to figure out there a son for which information is essential, the circumstances under which the user functions, the users' abilities to recognise the needed information, channels and supplies favored for obtaining information, and the obstacles to find information and its usage.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlights the role of information literacy as a promoter of socioeconomic and political growth. Information literacy has been projected as a solution to various obstacles in the path of rural development. It promises to enhance the socioeconomic growth of the rural communities and simultaneously empower the populace with the necessary skills to actively contribute to the information-based economy. Concisely, information literacy will be the remedy to all the ills facing the by rural communities in Africa. It will enable the rural populace to exploit their talents to the fullest

possibility the obstacles arising in the dispersion of information to rural communities should be recognised and attended to at the earliest so that ignorance, socioeconomic stagnation and informational deprivation are forever removed from the rural communities and they can effectively contribute to the current globally depressed economy.

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