

Transcending conventional information work: a strategy for librarians and other information workers in Africa to be relevant in the 21st century

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TRANSCENDING CONVENTIONAL INFORMATION WORK: A STRATEGY FOR LIBRARIANS AND OTHER INFORMATION WORKERS IN AFRICA TO BE RELEVANT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Information and its communication have been central to the civilization of mankind since time immemorial. In Africa, until recently, though information has been recognized as a critical resource in the development process, the role of information workers, especially librarians has not been appreciated and librarians have largely continued to be seen to be irrelevant to the overall development process. However, with the developments in information technology, which are transforming an industrial age into an information-centered age, even in Africa, the value of information is moving to the center stage.

Like anywhere else in the world, libraries and information services in Africa are beginning to have greater diversity, credibility and creativity than ever before. But whether librarians and other information workers significantly seize the opportunity or not depends largely on whether they create the space to step back from their conventional information work to be able to put effort into discovering the skills of analysis and persuasion needed to shape an alternative vision of information services out of their experience of interacting with different information users. The challenge for librarians in Africa is to seek ways of maximizing their impact and of maximizing the value of lessons drawn from their experience without sacrificing the human face of their services.

Such kind of 'Scaling up' can be achieved by expanding activities and their outreach by helping community and national agents of change to initiate information programs and to coordinate their documentation efforts. But it can also be achieved by using their experience to persuade architects of development projects to change. They can urge community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to integrate information activities into development projects so as to be relevant to the poor. They can advise governments to take specific actions that will integrate information into reform policies. They can persuade official aid agencies to modify their programs. And they can lobby internationally for libraries and information institutions in the North to make reforms in the global information regime so as to allow librarians and other information workers in Africa a more competitive edge. This new role calls for a conscious decision to move beyond a doing to an influencing role.

This paper presents a strategy for librarians and information workers in Africa to maximize their impact so as to be and remain relevant in the 21st century. Based on the experience of the Zambia Library Association (ZLA), this paper discusses the strategies the Association is using to become relevant to the Zambian community. The strategy does not just call for a fine tuning to the system to work better but to structural transformation, a transition to a new order, and new values predicated on the needs of the people, both today and in future generations.