

Information & Knowledge Management as a Driving Force for Socio-economic Development in Africa

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I am a PhD student at the University of Sheffield, Information School and I come from Malawi. I am a librarian for Kamuzu College of Nursing, University of Malawi. My PhD topic is “Experiencing HIV and AIDS information: a phenomenological study of serodiscordant couples in Malawi.” As a PhD student from Africa studying in the United Kingdom it was important for me to go back and interact with colleagues.

The Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa Library and Information Associations (SCECSAL) was a great opportunity to interact with big names in the library and information profession in Africa. With support from UKeIG’s student conference grant I was able to attend the 2014 edition of the conference.

SCECSAL is one the biggest regional conferences in Africa for library and information professionals. The 2014 conference was held in Lilongwe, Malawi from 28th July to 1st August 2014. The theme of the conference; *Information and knowledge management as a driving force for socio-economic development in Africa* was timely as Africa is struggling to address many problems affecting a cross section of its citizens.

One of the important sessions was on provision of information to rural farmers in Africa. The discussions at the end of the session addressed the shortfalls in library and information services with respect to provision of information to farmers. Session participants noted that rural farmers are a highly specialised category of information users. For example, they need information about markets and prices for their produce; weather information; information on agricultural inputs and agricultural finance, etc. The information is sourced from several different organizations including markets, banks, meteorological stations, etc. Considering that most farmers in rural Africa have low levels of education, the information has to be re-packaged to make it suitable for their needs.

The other important session was on knowledge and information for health care delivery services. Africa is ravaged by numerous health problems that affect the socio-economic development of the continent. Papers presented in this session highlighted the need for library and information services to reach out to the general public living in rural communities in Africa. Probably one telling example is demonstrating the importance of this topic is my PhD study. I am investigating the experience of HIV and AIDS information by serodiscordant couples in Malawi. Emerging results of my study suggest that HIV and AIDS information is designed without knowledge and consideration of the needs of the

recipients. As a result HIV and AIDS information is experienced with negative emotions. This is true for other health related information.

Another topic addressed by the conference and important to the socio-economic development of Africa was information and knowledge services for people with special needs. Anecdotal evidence in Africa suggests that people with special needs are not able to benefit from public services such as education, health and judiciary because of poor access to information. The session highlighted the bottlenecks that still exist in many sectors of society in Africa that hinder people with special needs from accessing these services. Bottlenecks that were discussed included admission policies to educational institutions, and copyright laws that gag library and information services.

Conference resolutions

Based on issues emanating from the papers presented and discussed in the conference SCECSAL members made the following resolutions:

- Each SCECSAL member association should align its activities to the national and global development agenda and report on its post-2015 strategy at the XXII SCECSAL in 2016
- In line with parent institutional policies and strategies, libraries and information centres in the SCECSAL region should develop e-strategies that encompass open access, social media, digitisation and e-learning resources for the provision of optimal access
- SCECSAL member associations should host national conversations on the provision of information services to people with special needs

My time at the SCECSAL conference was beneficial in preparing for future work on my PhD and after graduating. I got useful feedback from Ruth Hoskins, Associate Professor at the University of Kwazulu Natal, and Joseph Uta, a professor at Mzuzu University. Beyond the PhD, training insights from presenters and participants from other countries will assist me to shape my interventions for the serodiscordant couples I am researching about. Based on what I learned from the conference I will intervene at the policy level to make HIV and AIDS information design responsive to the needs of the target audience. In addition, as a librarian at the University of Malawi, I will design community engagement interventions to address the shortfalls in information design and delivery identified in my study.

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