

# **Libraries and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa: Realities of Culture and Curriculum**

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines a library 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” (1970). Libraries, by UNESCO definition, are few in SSA, although there are many relevant information related activities. Historically, library and information professionals (LIS) in SSA suffer from the perception that libraries are not necessary. They face obstacles including illiteracy, oral tradition, and a limited awareness of the need for libraries. Despite the perception that libraries are unnecessary in SSA, there are record numbers of professionals graduating from LIS programs and engaged in productive information-related work. A particular example is the need for information in the fight against AIDS. Information must be organized, managed, and disseminated to help combat the spread of the disease, offering a particular challenge for libraries. This paper presents the preliminary findings of a literature review and survey of library and information professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa who are involved with HIV/AIDS information dissemination. AIDS information activities are reported, identifying challenges for LIS professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa and the opportunity for libraries is presented. Implications for LIS education are discussed. Through examination of current information activities related to AIDS, libraries can take an important and more active role while facilitating the identity and reputation of the profession. LIS curriculum could be adjusted to address the unique information needs of Sub-Saharan societies.

## **Background**

Libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa are faced with unique challenges including oral tradition, illiteracy, a limited awareness and understanding of the information needs of people of Sub-Saharan Africa societies, and scarce resources. Information is often transmitted through oral tradition, using informal channels, from one person to another. Information is commonly transmitted through oral media such as story, song, and poetry and is often delivered by designated persons within society.

## Methodology

A literature review was conducted of internet resources, print materials, and fee-based databases (i.e., DIALOG) to determine the HIV/AIDS information activities of LIS professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa. Electronic mail requests for information on projects in Sub-Saharan Africa were sent out to library association discussion lists, libraries, and individuals as identified throughout the review. Internet searches of government and non-governmental organization (NGO) sites were also conducted to identify relevant information including current and historic surveillance reports. Approximately 450 email responses were received, identifying the HIV/AIDS information activities of LIS professionals in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## Findings

HIV/AIDS information related activities were identified and summarized by Information Issue, Activity, and Structure, (Table 1). These included language, illiteracy, audience reach, and format.

Table 7. Summary of Issues/Activities/Structure of Library Involvement in HIV/AIDS Information in Sub-Saharan Africa

Information Issue	Activity	Partnership
Language translation	Access/reading	Local community
Illiteracy	Peer education	Educational institutions
Audience reach	Programs	Radio, print
Format	Oral dissemination	Radio, audiobooks

It is clear that one of the primary needs of information in general, in Sub-Saharan Africa, is for materials to be available in the local languages. Despite the official languages of English, French, and Portuguese, many indigenous languages are spoken throughout the Sub-Saharan world. Without the necessary translations, even the best information is useless. This is a service that appeared in the project reviews as one that could be provided by libraries.

Some of the projects mentioned the use of audio in information delivery (e.g., audio

books, radio), drama, story, and song, as a few of the methods used to deliver the HIV/AIDS message. Libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa appear to recognize the need to include many of these formats in their HIV/AIDS information services. The same considerations need to be taken into account when designing and selecting materials for specific audiences. The use of fiction, for example, is recognized as a means to make HIV/AIDS information more interesting, particularly for children and youth. Additional formats for delivery that are culturally appropriate in the oral cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa also need to be considered. Again, formats such as radio and drama, appear to work very well. Libraries could incorporate these various formats into their collections and activities as well. (ADD MORE HERE)

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were identified, based on the activities that were reported based on successful or potentially successful activities of libraries involved in HIV/AIDS information dissemination.

1. Establish partnerships between libraries and other sources of HIV/AIDS information activities (e.g., educational institutions, the media). For example, despite the poor perception of libraries, the value of information in HIV/AIDS prevention is not only well recognized, but is increasingly at the core of policy and funding practices.
2. Expand the scope of information in Africa to include information sources outside the role of traditional libraries (e.g., community centers, mobile libraries). The library, in an African context, must have flexible programs designed to meet the unique needs of the African people. This includes:
3. Encourage the development and production of information products and services appropriate in the unique African context, addressing issues of language, delivery, and publishing.
4. Redefine the role of African libraries and librarians. There is an opportunity for LIS professionals to take a strong lead in the dissemination activities of HIV/AIDS information. Not only is this an appropriate activity for librarians and information professionals, it has the potential to strengthen the role of those professionals.

## **Implications for LIS Education**

Current library responses to the challenges for LIS professionals are creative and varied, and are slowly contributing to the unique identity of African libraries and librarians. The types of services and their delivery offered by libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa reveal the early formation of a professional identity. To further support the development of an LIS profession in SSA, it is necessary to consider the role of LIS education. Historically, many professors at LIS programs in SSA are educated outside of Africa, bringing the cultural influences of their training back with them when they return to teach. In addition, current

LIS curriculum in SSA does not address courses that address the challenges identified in this study. There are two particular areas that could be addressed by inclusion in the curriculum. The first, addresses the unique oral tradition across most of SSA societies. Coursework centered on oral dissemination of information could better support the information needs of the African peoples while developing LIS professionals to better utilize their unique information environment. The second is to offer specialized training, possibly certification, in meeting the information needs of people living with or affected by HIV/AIDS.

Illiteracy is another area of potential implication for library service. Because much of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa is illiterate, materials need to be available in a variety of formats in addition to print. Some of the projects mentioned the use of audio in information delivery (e.g., audio books, radio), drama, story, and song, as a few of the methods used to deliver the HIV/AIDS message. Libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa appear to recognize the need to include many of these formats in their HIV/AIDS information services. The same considerations need to be taken into account when designing and selecting materials for specific audiences. The use of fiction, for example, is recognized as a means to make HIV/AIDS information more interesting, particularly for children and youth. Additional formats for delivery that are culturally appropriate in the oral cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa also need to be considered. Again, formats such as radio and drama, appear to work very well. Libraries could incorporate these various formats into their collections and activities as well.

There were a variety of programs mentioned throughout the projects reviewed in this study. Again, because illiteracy is common, basic reading programs, integrated with the dissemination of HIV/AIDS information were considered to be effective. Opportunities for library staff to work with local communities on reading were common and certainly fit within the scope of library activities. A related theme was peer education. This was considered to be particularly important when providing services targeted to young people. Regardless of other programmatic activities, peer education appeared to be the most common approach to spreading the HIV/AIDS message. Libraries could incorporate volunteers from their local communities and train them to provide support services in this regard.

Another common theme regarding programs offering HIV/AIDS information was the notion of an information clearinghouse that serves local community needs for information on HIV/AIDS. This approach was reflected in the rise of community centers, youth centers, documentation centers, multipurpose telecenters, and other names for a similar idea. These centers serve as more than just a collection of resources, but also as a community center where local forums and meetings can be conducted, both formal and informal. In order to assess the needs of a particular community and identify its unique needs, libraries would do well to conduct a needs analysis. Not specific to HIV/AIDS information

activities, needs analysis was identified as a common failing of libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa in general.

The project reviews also suggested some patterns in approach to the way that libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa are structured that have implications for the delivery of HIV/AIDS information and services. Because of the cultural uniqueness of African libraries, flexibility and responsiveness are necessary to provide quality service within the Sub-Saharan region. Given the limited resources, however, means that libraries need to look outside the traditional scope of the library to provide a broader range of services that will better serve their communities. Partnerships and collaborations with other organizations was a common approach used in many of the projects that were reviewed. Working more closely with educational organizations, for example, was common practice among the projects, where libraries are encouraged to become more active participants in the schools and with educational NGOs. Additional collaborations that were mentioned include working with media such as radio stations to include more programming content made available to wider audiences. Not only does this offer libraries access to a broader range of formats, but it also allows libraries to participate in a much needed support role of other organizations besides their local communities. Charles Batambuze, Chair of the Uganda National Library Association, suggests, "I think that libraries have had a limited and sometimes an indirect role in the dissemination of HIV/AIDS information. For example communication experts who develop radio and other mass media messages for the general public get their facts by undertaking research in a library of some kind" (Batambuze May 31, 2005).

In order to accommodate the greater demands for flexibility and responsiveness, library staff need to have better training. This was another theme that appeared in the broader literature of African libraries in general and is outside the scope of this study. It is important to note, however, that library and information science education in Sub-Saharan Africa is vibrant and developing its own cultural identity. For example, there are currently efforts underway to establish a consortium of East African library and information science programs that will allow for resource sharing, faculty and student exchange, and collective buying practices. There is demand for more graduates of these programs, particularly at the Bachelor's level, since that is considered to be the professional degree. In addition, Makerere University has just started a doctoral program with four students in its initial cohort (Kigongo-Bukenya 2005).

There were other themes revealed in the review of HIV/AIDS information projects. The lack of national policy to direct library participation in HIV/AIDS information activities was identified. Without guidance and support from national, district/provincial, and local government, funding remains constricted, staffing shortages continue, and poor perceptions of the library persist. Financial assets are a particular problem for academic libraries, for example. Universities typically contribute less than 1% of their budgets to

their libraries (Sturges and Neill 1997). This translates into a shortage of materials as well as a shortage of staff with the necessary skills.

There are also problems within the African publishing industry itself. Foreign publishers have historically demonstrated very little interest in publishing works by African authors (Sturges and Neill 1997). Again, the issues involved in the publishing industry are complex and outside the immediate scope of this study. It is important to note, however, a couple of points that emerged from the project review. First, many materials that are distributed on HIV/AIDS do not originate in Africa and may not be as culturally appropriate as those that originate within Africa. Materials developed by Africans themselves may be more effective in transmitting the HIV/AIDS information. Second, the costs of printing are very high (e.g., paper, colored prints, reproduction) and often render them inaccessible for many libraries to afford.

Finally, although the perception of libraries was not always explicit, it seems plausible that libraries are still not considered to be particularly important, either in their role in general, or in their contribution to the HIV/AIDS battle. This conclusion is determined by the limited information and number of library activities in HIV/AIDS information that are reported. This may not be an accurate conclusion, however, since more information may exist in the grey literature outside the reach of this study.

What was revealed, however, by all projects was the recognition of the importance of HIV/AIDS information. Libraries may not be perceived as the main source for information but the value of HIV/AIDS information is well recognized. According to one African citizen, "We have the knowledge; we have information on HIV/AIDS, we know there's no cure for it. We know the information is the only way of preventing the disease and that's where the challenge is. If we can take that out into the communities, let them understand the whole thing" (UNICEF Radio nd).