

Democracy, literacy and poverty -- can text messages bring the academic library to African civic leaders?

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Authored by Chantal Phillips, Pamela MacKay, Alice Nkhoma-Wamunza, Arja Vainio-Mattila, Benedict Mongula

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In the spring of 2009, our Canadian team of 2 Librarians and a professor, spent a month in Africa collaborating with Tanzanian academics to understand the information environment of villagers at the foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro where 3 years of drought was hitting families hard. We were working with our Tanzanian counterparts on the initial stages of developing a way to ensure that remote communities can have access to information related to government services and entitlements. Although this may seem a stretch for an academic librarian, maintaining access to information is at the core of librarianship.

The role of the academic library in supporting civil society

Umberto Eco argues that the library is the central institution of Western culture (Pieterse 1997). Libraries within the Western democratic tradition often refer to their place in maintaining and promoting the public sphere of discussion and free exchange of ideas. Although this is an imperfect ideal, it has a longstanding place in democracies (Byrne, 1999).

The project

"Building Civil Society Capacity for Poverty Reduction" is a collaborative project of Huron University College, Canada and the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This project was developed by faculty members and librarians at both institutions and is designed to strengthen the capacity of the university to support civil society participation in policy processes for poverty reduction. This successful partnership was awarded funding from the Canadian government through the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC).

The project included a baseline study of organizations to assess the desire for accurate information and sources for policy research data and comparative case studies on poverty reduction success stories. The project also carried out a rural Tanzanian baseline study to understand issues related to poverty reduction for the marginalized rural poor.

The first year of this 6 year project was devoted to the university campus in the capital, Dar es Salaam, on the Atlantic coast. We were able to complete the renovation and refurbishment of the Institute of Development Studies Graduate

Resource Room. This included the creation of a selection tool for collection development in areas of development, poverty and civil society. The faculty were able to use it to select 200 books which were added to the collection of the IDS Resource Centre and main library at the University of Dar es Salaam, thus strengthening the ability of the faculty to add civil society courses to their offerings and develop a Masters level degree.

In this first year, interviews with civil society resource centre managers in Dar es Salaam were carried out to determine their information needs with a view to supporting non-profit agencies in the capital through the resources of the university. An additional resource for this type of information sharing is the newly minted online version of the IDS journal now published through the African Journals Online project (AJOL). The role of the university in supporting non-profits who are engaged in policy level discussions on poverty issues is not easy to define, but there are many non-formal links between faculty, librarians, graduate students and those in Tanzania who are eager to build civil society capacity.

The social theorist Jurgen Habermas was instrumental in developing the concept of the public sphere as "an arena in which individuals participate in discussions about matters of common concern, in an atmosphere free of coercion or dependencies that would incline acquiescence or silence" (White, 1995). This idea of the public sphere evokes the library with its values of equitable access, intellectual freedom and open public spaces and has inspired a number of library theorists to position the library as an important institution within it. Libraries provide spaces for public discourse and the information needed to stimulate discussion. Library staff can teach some of the essential skills needed to participate in an information society. The library is charged with building a collection that challenges censorship and champions marginalized voices.

Braman in "Theorizing the impact of IT on library-state relations" places the "contemporary concept of the library as a medium between local communities and the state" and as such it is a "product of the bureaucratic welfare state" (Braman: 1995). She charts the diffusion of this concept throughout the twentieth century until its decline in the 1970s. Over the previous four decades, Golding and Murdock saw the burden on libraries increasing as welfare state functions declined in the 1970s and library contributions to the delivery of social services increased (Golding & Murdock 1989).

This is not the case in Tanzania, where the capacity of libraries cannot cope with demand. Libraries that are created by the state are usually overloaded by student users. The decline of the state under decades of cut-backs in Tanzania has resulted in a lack of public access to government information and indeed any other forms of written communication meant for public consumption. This has meant that citizens are not able to access accurate and timely information.

The plethora of failed information cafes and internet access points is a testament to the efforts of many in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa to fill the need for access to a range of information, but the failure of these efforts as noted by evaluation reports and overviews of ICT in East Africa (Sey & Fellows, 2009) describes all too bleakly the reality that information needs are still unmet.

Public libraries have taken up the role of promoting participation in civic life through a variety of programs and activities in many Western democracies. Academic libraries have traditionally limited their access and activities to the university community. However in recent years, universities are demonstrating a new commitment to engaging with their broader communities through collaborative partnerships, incorporating community based learning into programs, and hosting public forums for community discourse, such as the American Democracy Project of the Association of State Colleges and Universities. Academic libraries have much to contribute to this community engagement and have also begun to build civic participation by providing access to selected resources, building collections of local materials, hosting dialogues providing research expertise and training, and by providing professional support for public and community libraries and resource centres.

The Tanzanian Canadian partnership project "Building Civil Society Capacity for Poverty Reduction" was designed to strengthen the University of Dar es Salaam's capacity to build sustainable partnerships with civil society organizations and to respond to their needs for education, training, research and information in order to participate effectively in poverty reduction. Tanzania has developed a poverty reduction strategy articulated in a national poverty reduction strategy paper. The poverty reduction strategy of 2005 was developed with the participation of a wide range of stakeholders from local government, civil society organizations and communities. Ongoing participation by civil society is part of the strategy with responsibilities such as building community resources, empowering communities and monitoring and evaluating results.

Civil society organizations need the tools for participation, and the university has much to contribute -- research, scholarship, engaged students, information and knowledge. An important tool required for changing the dynamic of civil engagement is improved access to information and the ability to effectively use that information. Recognizing this, one of four components of the project is information and library resource development with the UDSM Library playing an integral role in the project. The role of the university library is particularly important in a developing country such as Tanzania, where the lack of a widespread system of regional, municipal and public libraries hinders access to information about government services and public debate on topics relevant to governance.

Monduli, Northern Tanzania

While it takes no stretch of the imagination to see how the university library can engage with large non-profit agencies to increase the information available to citizen groups on topics related to governance and poverty reduction, it is perhaps harder to see how remote villages can be served by academics.

This project, however, is experimenting with improving the available information about government services and entitlements in order to breathe life into the slow process of providing information to village level leaders through government channels. The desire is to see how a model of information access could support poverty reduction goals designed by central government with the rural population -- the majority of Tanzanians -- in mind.

This project has begun one model project in the area of Northern Tanzania, Monduli District. Although many people travel through on the safari circuit, right beside the affluence of international travel is the squalor of struggling homesteads that lack basic services such as water, electricity or roads.

Most of the people in the villages we visited are Maasai. According to our initial baseline study conducted by team members with the help of graduate students in February 2009, there are many families with over 100 head of cattle who cannot feed themselves, suffer an acute shortage of water, cannot find fuel wood nearby and who have poor health and little access to education (Chambua & Mongula, 2009). The problem of access to water is such that some women report waking up at 2 a.m. in order to return to their villages with water by noon.

The state of environmental degradation has resulted in few trees and soil erosion leading to a lack of wood available for women to burn for cooking. Alternate fuel sources are not sufficient, although cow dung is also burned for household use. There is also an imbalance in work loads requiring women to maintain the household and herd calves, as well as care for the children. Boys are engaged in daily herding and husbandry of goats and sheep. Men are employed on the land only in emergencies to herd cattle to new locations in cases of drought or to find veterinary services for the sick.

To compound the extra work of being a female there is widespread abuse of women -- 12 out of 13 women in one village reported being beaten by their husbands -- and strong adherence to the practice of female genital mutilation. Marriages takes place between the ages of 8-18 and mothers often have 2 or 3 children before the age of 20.

Poor access to health services and lack of medical supplies exacerbates the problem of waterborne disease. It is common to find people debilitated by treatable infections or malaria, which is endemic to the region.

The education and information environment in Monduli District

Our first attempt to understand the information needs and the context of the Tanzanians in Monduli District was to work with our Tanzanian colleagues, meet with Monduli villagers and map the existing conditions. This was our follow-up trip after the baseline study at the beginning of the year. What we found after interviews with local officials and village meetings with women and men in May 2009 was not surprising, but nonetheless challenging. As would be expected, public services, including village administration, health and education services and extension services are weak, due to the lack of funds and coordination of local officials. The lack of resources is reflected in the limited ability of local government to respond to local needs, even to visit any community beyond their office area. One local community development official stated she was unable to travel anywhere as she had no transport and no money for the local bus.

Community participation in decisions is reported as being very low and there is little follow up of plans and feedback from higher levels. Women, in particular are not informed of meetings, training opportunities, programs or policies designed to benefit them. Information gaps, local attitudes and cultures, as well as gender power structures prevent the deployment of appropriate technologies that would considerably alleviate women's conditions and benefit many others. Health and environmental education, for example is badly needed to reduce disease and infections, but there is little initiative shown by government or non-profits to solve the problems facing the community.

Next steps: how to provide information where there is no library

Our next steps involve identifying the most appropriate way to deliver information regarding government services and local news to remote villagers with limited literacy in Swahili. Most villagers speak Kimaasai and understand enough Swahili to trade and greet strangers but are not capable of reading government bulletins or participating in discussions on local government budget issues or other matters related to poverty reduction. Nonetheless, there are extensive discussions in which citizens participate regarding poverty reduction strategies and there is a need for follow-up and increased accountability of government leaders who are implementing the latest policies and practices for poverty reduction.

Given the lack of infrastructure and the oral nature of communication, our challenge as librarians is to envision a method of transferring the type of information on policy and poverty that is available. Policy discussions in Tanzania are driven by officials and agencies in the capital, although regional and even district officials are able to participate from time to time on some issues. The barriers that preclude villagers' participation are multiple and complex. If we are to imagine a discussion that involves providing background data to villagers as

well as policy alternatives then we have to be creative and use successful communication methods that are already stable.

Our ideas for replicating successful communication start with the village meetings which are attended by leaders and run in the local language. To supply leaders with further information in response to community needs we found several existing options. Traditionally, youth are designated as runners that carry messages from homestead to homestead. Letters or village meeting times and even some simple information can be disseminated broadly in this way, alerting community members about access to health or farm extension services, for example. This method has been practiced for thousands of years so it is a model which can be relied upon, within limits. Some messages can be distorted, miscommunicated or deliberately stopped if they are unpopular.

The village meetings we hosted offered a suggested method for improving on this traditional practice by designating a Village Information Officer. This post would be held by a young adult charged with getting and requesting information on local issues as needed by the villagers.

Another successful existing system for communicating is local radio, which is popular and can be accessed by virtually every household. Many Tanzanians are eager to listen to parliamentary debates at budget time in this fashion and often debate issues related to government accountability and policy after hearing parliamentary sessions on the radio. There are a limited number of radio licenses and many stations are owned by regional power brokers so political interference is a likely problem for talk shows when policy debates are being promoted.

An emerging system which shows some promise is the popularity and widespread use of text messages carried over mobile phones. The vast majority of households have access to phones which, for a small fee, are charged by car batteries at the weekly market. Tanzanians can pay as they use their phones and some non-profits offer phone cards to their representatives to allow information to be sent to remote and rural citizens via the phone system. In this way, messages can be pushed out to a large group of people, who are then responsible for sharing information with others. In this fashion it would be possible to offer a wide variety of data in short message format including reports on prices for crops and livestock, times for health clinic visits, emergency plans and relief programs, etc.

Whether the information is time sensitive, such as weather and market prices; generic, such as health clinic entitlements; or specific, such as where to go to get help building rain water collectors, this project needs to be able to coordinate the transfer of information from government and non-profits to individuals. Originally we had planned to create a tele-centre or resource office in Monduli town near the district government offices, but after reviewing the basic needs of such a centre we decided to pursue a partnership with the existing farmers' association

that already functions as a node for community by providing a vast array of services and member-driven activities controlled by small farmers.

After three years of working in the area with Tanzanian professors, graduate students, Canadian librarians and undergraduate project staff, and with the ongoing cooperation of District Officials, we are now able to report a successful collaboration with government officials that allows for enhanced information efforts going out into the community and more opportunities for discussing government priorities and benefits to address priority needs.

This emphasis on increased communication and the preference for oral culture have led the project to promote the Maasai Radio Network in Arusha region. We sponsored a workshop for all Monduli District officials explaining how the community radio station operates and supplied households in the villages we visit with radios where they were lacking. Villagers were very enthusiastic in their support of increased radio programming on community issues. Officials evaluated their media training positively and were encouraged by the District Commissioner to use the station for interviews and information sharing.

At the same time, in the fall of 2010, we asked villages to select one woman and one man to act as Information Officers for the local village council. Remembering and honouring the strength of Maasai culture is an important aspect of working with these local elders in project meetings and interviews. The tradition of using young men to carry messages between homesteads is reflected in this new role of creating Village Information Officers. Each person selected has the responsibility to request information from local government and pass on the news or set up a meeting to spread the information. The Information Officer is also offered a cheap phone, prepaid phone cards and a solar charger for use in getting information.

The added telecommunication equipment -- radios and phones- are also offered as tools for income generation in these remote, rural communities. The project encourages villagers to rent phones, sell minutes, and lend the solar charger for use by others to build income opportunities at the village level in addition to expanding the flow of information to their communities.

The emphasis on technology that is in common use, supporting local languages, using existing cultural norms and practices in novel ways are all examples of how development interventions that we undertake rest on decades of past practice that inform participatory development and communication. Improving practices in agricultural extension or primary health care have been shown to rest on the tried and true formulas of listening to what the community wants and taking the small, sustainable steps forward that can be implemented by individuals with incremental investments in training and technology.

At present an undergraduate student is coming back from Tanzania with data to help populate a database that would be the first attempt at formulating answers to the questions that locals have about basic services and entitlements. What pre-natal care can I get and when is the nurse in town? Who will support building a rain water collector in my village? What is the contact number for the veterinary extension officer? How can we lobby the government for a new school in our area? How do I apply for a pension?

These types of questions could be answered at the district level if villagers knew who to ask and if there was someone willing to send a message, write a letter, text the answer or perhaps do a local radio talk show on a special topic to broaden access to information and support local initiatives. The first step is building a database of answers to common local questions. After that we will be modelling how we can provide access when people come to their local leaders with questions.

It is clear after meeting the Tanzanians in Monduli District that there is a great sense of frustration and some fear about the lack of responsiveness at the local government level. This creates real problems such as barriers for access to education, for example due to poor schools and inadequate teaching staff. They also raise the spectre of what could happen in a real emergency. Given poor water quality and lack of good water sources, if cholera broke out who would respond? Would anyone care? Would anyone know beyond their communities? These are the concerns they live with every day.

Our response cannot provide the sole solution, but there is a possibility that we can demonstrate that there are ways to strengthen the existing government services by offering more access to what is available and promoting the idea that the government does have officials in place to respond to local needs. Who they are, where they work and how to make a request for service is the job at hand. We shall see if the academic library can play a part in civil society by modelling an information access solution that promotes the value of an informed citizenry.

This initiative is part of a broader development of graduate level courses in the capital, Dar es Salaam that will focus on civil society. The Senate of UDSM approved the graduate level program on civil society designed under the leadership of our Tanzanian project director Prof. Benedict Mongula. As the university begins to emphasize graduating a cadre of students fluent in good governance issues and eager to build stronger civic spaces, our pilot program offering answers to citizens' questions will be supporting an ongoing push towards an open, free debate of ideas needed to strengthen government. The elections of 2010 saw Tanzania's ruling party of 40 years challenged by a rising opposition party. Vigorous debate replaced complacency in many towns and cities this past year. For the first time, political parties sent broadcast SMS messages to encourage citizens to vote. It is an opportune time to be reaching out to support civil society and you can hear the ringing in the streets.

Tanzanians are quick to use their phones to bank and pay bills. Politicians know how to find their constituents by text message. Hopefully the citizens will soon be learning how to call back and remind their representatives about the many promises made and services that need to be delivered. In this way, the evolution of the citizen, the public sphere and the role of academia will unfold on the East African shores of the Indian Ocean.

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