

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE INFORMATION RICH AND INFORMATION POOR IN MALAWI

Lizzie Malemia

Mzuzu University, lmalemia@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: *This paper presents the results of the appraisal of the gap between the information rich and information poor in Malawi by focusing on the notable legislations and technological infrastructures that contribute to the information flow in Malawi. It also explores the strides made in Malawi in terms of library development, electronic information development and human resource development. The appraisal employed a desk research approach where journal articles, internet publications, government publications, online newspapers, books and international organisations' databases like UNESCO, World Bank, UNDP, European Commission and United Nations were reviewed. The review found out that the Malawi government has notable legislations that can assist in bridging the gap between the information rich and poor and these include Access to Information Act, Copyright Act, and National Information Communication and Technology Policy. It also found out that there are initiatives from the government, and private and non-governmental organisations to reach out to the masses with ICT, technological infrastructure, library, electronic information, and human resource development. The paper concludes that although there are initiatives that have been developed, they are inadequate especially for the rural masses to close the gap between the information rich and information poor.*

KEYWORDS: *information rich, information poor, information gap, information society, Malawi.*

BACKGROUND

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims at ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all United Nations (2015). There are extremely huge challenges for countries on their road to sustainable development. A lot of people still live-in poverty and there is an increase in differences within and among countries. In concurring with the United Nations, African countries also adopted a vision of the future towards sustainable development called "Agenda 2063 – The Africa We Want". It is aimed at repositioning Africa to becoming a dominant player in the global arena African Union Commission (2015, 1). All these are development efforts which embrace the economic, social and environmental sustainability of countries.

The United Nations progress report on Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education estimated that 750 million adults remained illiterate by 2016, and two thirds of them were women. Half of the global illiterate population lives in South Asia, and a quarter live in sub-Saharan Africa. Many developing countries still lack basic infrastructure and facilities to provide an effective learning environment. Sub-Saharan Africa faces the biggest challenges at the primary and lower secondary levels, less than half of schools have access to electricity, the Internet, computers and basic drinking water United Nations (2019).

According to the World Bank (2015), nearly 1.1 billion people were still living in extreme poverty compared to 1.7 billion in 1990. The population of people who lived on less US\$1.90 a day was 736 million, down from 1.85 billion in 1990. Despite the progress made in reducing poverty, the number of people living in extreme poverty remains unacceptably high and the declined rates have been uneven in all regions. More than half of the extreme poor live in Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the number of poor people in the region increased by 9 million, with 413 million people living on less than US\$1.90 a day.

BACKGROUND OF MALAWI

Malawi is a land locked country in south-eastern Africa with a total population of 17,563,749 million National Statistics of Malawi (2018, 15). It is 118,480 square kilometers including land and water. The country is divided into four regions and the capital city is Lilongwe. It shares borders with Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique. It has ten major ethnic groups that is Chewa, Nyanja, Lomwe, Yao, Tumbuka, Sena, Tonga, Ngoni, Ngonde and Lambya. From 1968 to 1994, Chewa was the only national language apart from English. It was one of the languages used in print and broadcast media and it is spoken by a majority of the population. A majority of the population are Christians, and Muslims constitute about one-fifth of the population. Traditional beliefs are also adhered to by a small proportion of the population Kalinga et al. (2014).

Malawi is one of the least developed countries and it is ranked 171 out of 189 countries in terms of human development (United Nations Development Programme 2018). Despite rapid urbanisation, around 85% of the population lives in the rural areas and an overwhelming majority of the rural households are poor. According to the United Nations (2015), 75% of the population earns less than US\$1.25 a day. The poverty is derived from reliance on risk-prone activities like rain-fed agriculture where harvested quantities of crops, livestock and fish are primarily affected by weather shocks McCarthy, Brubaker, and de la Fuente (2016, 5). According to UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2016), Malawi's literacy rate stands at 73% for males and 59% for females.

Malawi became an independent country in 1964. An important change in the politics of Malawi took place in 1994 when a multiparty system of government was established after about three decades of one-party rule. On the onset of its democracy in 1994, the Government came up with long-term strategy documents to assist in developing the country further. Most important of these were the Malawi Vision 2020 (1997), the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) in 2002 and the Malawi Economic Growth Strategy (MEGS) in 2003.

INFORMATION GAP

Topping the several factors that contribute to the underdevelopment of a country are poverty and illiteracy. Literacy is critically important because being able to read and write makes a huge difference in doing many simple day-to-day activities. High illiteracy levels inhibit access to information especially in the rural poor. To effectively access and use information for sustainable development, illiteracy levels must be low. Language, religion, and cultural inclination have also an influence on how one can access and use information. As there is more information nowadays, it is more central in leading to a new type of society Webster (2014, 10).

There has been a long-standing tradition to characterise developing countries as 'underdeveloped, poor, and primitive'. These countries are viewed as if they do not possess any knowledge, information and ideas that could be transferred or copied by other countries Lundu (1989, 223). On a global scale, there is a growing gap between the rich and the poor in access to information. Information gap between the two groups in access to information can also be the lack of ability and opportunity to use the information in a way that contributes to people's cultural knowledge and economic well-being.

Information rich and information poor is related to the division of the general public into two groups depending on the way in which they use and relate to information. The information rich tend to be of a higher socioeconomic status, better educated, have better access to technology and are more technologically savvy than the information poor Chandler and Munday (2011). In most cases on a global scale, the information rich are considered to be those from the 'global north' and the information poor are from the 'global south' of the world. In countries, that is the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged Kagan (1999).

One of the critical aspects in the development of a country is information and it is the basis for economic growth. Access to information should be extended to embrace the society in order to develop. Therefore, the essential driving force of a developed country is the development of the deep-set structures of information to have an informed society. Considering the poverty and illiteracy levels of the Malawian population, diversity in cultures, languages, and religion, it is not clear what strides Malawi has made to close the gap between the information rich and information poor. This paper, therefore, appraises the gap between the information rich and information poor in Malawi. It explains the notable legislations and technological infrastructures that contribute to the information flow in Malawi. It also explores the strides made in Malawi in terms of library development, electronic information development and human resource development.

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the aim of the paper, the researcher employed a desk research methodology where extensive literature was reviewed from journal articles, internet publications, government publications, online newspapers, books and international organisations' databases like UNESCO, World Bank, UNDP, European Commission and United Nations. Desk research involves accessing data collected by key experts and information can be collected remotely Largan and Morris (2019, 30). The paper adopted mainly a qualitative approach.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND NOTABLE LEGISLATIONS

It is a fundamental human right to ask for, and receive information held by the public organisations and bodies. It is critically important to make sure that information held by the public, and in some cases private institutions is available and accessible to citizens. The right to seek, access and receive information is guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, and Article 4 of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa Media Institute of Southern Africa (n.d.). It is also recognised under Section 37 of the Malawi Constitution.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT

Sustainable Development Goal 16 seeks to ensure public access to information. In 2017, the Parliament of Malawi passed the Access to Information Act 2017, which gives ordinary Malawians the right of access to information which, is under the control of a public authority in order to promote transparency and accountability of public officers. Authorities are required to respond to requests within fifteen (15) days. A request for access to information is made orally or in writing. This implies that the society can request for any permissible information from the government. However, no penalty is stated on failure of public authorities to grant access to the requested information. This could deny access to information efforts by Malawians.

COPYRIGHT ACT

The Malawi Copyright Act 1989 was amended in 2016 to accommodate new developments. The Copyright Act 2016 of Malawi is a form of intellectual property protection granted under the Malawian law to the creators of original works of authorship such as literary works including sound recordings, dramatic, musical and artistic works, audio-visual works, sound recordings and broadcasts, the rights of performers, technological measures and rights management information, establishment of Copyright Society of Malawi (COSOMA) and the Creativity Promotion Fund COSOMA (2017). In addition, Malawi is a member of international treaties like the Marrakesh Treaty which helps to end the book famine faced by people who are blind, visually impaired or otherwise print disabled. According to the Marrakesh Treaty, countries which consent to the Treaty must ensure that their laws allow blind people and their organisations to make accessible format books without the need to ask permission first from the copyright holder (African Regional Intellectual Property Organization 2018, 3). The amended Malawi Copyright Act is in compliant with the Marrakesh Treaty in terms of accessible

formats. Section 49 of the Malawi Copyright Act indicates that the reproduction of copies shall be made available only to disabled people for intended purposes COSOMA (2017).

NATIONAL INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY POLICY

Information and communication technology (ICT) bring a lot of benefits and opportunities. Malawi cannot forge ahead with its development agenda without putting in place an appropriate framework for ICT to support and accelerate various initiatives and interventions at all levels of society. Malawi aspires to have a knowledge-based economy with a global role and it believes that through maximum integration of ICT in all sectors and the provision of ICT services to the rural areas, the use of ICT can help usher in sustained growth of the Malawian economy.

In 2006, Malawi developed a National ICT for Development Policy (ICT4D) in order to build a knowledge-based economy and information rich society. Malawi was convinced that its agriculture-based economy can rapidly grow and diversify through participation in the information society and this policy had eight priority areas. Later in 2013, ICT4D Policy was amended to be named National ICT Policy. The National ICT Policy focuses on ten priority areas namely: Strategic ICT Leadership, Human Capital Development, E-Government Services, Industries, Infrastructure Development, ICT in the priority Growth Sectors, Responsive ICT Legal, Regulatory and Institutional Framework, National Security, International Cooperation, Universal Access of ICT and ICT related services with aim of facilitating the creation of an enabling environment for efficient, effective and sustainable utilisation, exploitation and development of ICT in all sectors of the economy, including the rural and underserved communities in order to attain an information rich society ICT Policy (2013). Countries that have poor ICT infrastructure are faced with a threat to faster economic growth.

TECHNOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Technological capabilities have always been a fundamental component of economic growth. New technologies are one of the most visible indicators of new times, and they are frequently taken to signal the coming of an information society Webster (2014, 11). Many African countries are trying hard to catch up with the fast changes in information and communications. Malawi, like many other countries in Africa, has a history of underdeveloped communications infrastructure. Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) highly prioritises the development of the ICT sector MGDS (2017).

According to a survey by the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) (2014, 27), revealed that 19.2% of Malawians in urban areas and 21.1% in the rural areas own or have access to a computer. This mainly could be due to the expensiveness of the machines. The Internet is a vital infrastructure for access to knowledge. Although Malawi has experienced growth in the ICT industry after the development of the ICT policy, the level of access to information technology infrastructure is still low. The survey also revealed that only 3% of the rural Malawi and 24.3% from the urban area has access to the Internet. That is a small percentage considering that 85% of the population lives in the rural areas. It further revealed that 43% of Malawians have a mobile phone. Only 30% in the rural areas have a mobile phone and only 24% own a phone that is capable of browsing the Internet.

In 2009, the government of Malawi in collaboration with the World Bank embarked on a Regional Communication Infrastructure Project which aimed at improving the quality, availability and affordability of communications services while at the same time improving Malawi's connectivity to international communications services Public Private Partnership Commission (2009). In 2015, the project came to an end when the construction of the international optic fibre network was launched which reduced the costs hampering Internet access to broadband. In addition, the Electricity Supply Cooperation of Malawi (ESCOM) laid fibre-optic cables on their

power lines throughout Malawi in order to build the networks that form part of the country's national fibre-optic backbone Mogha (2017).

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) pioneered the implementation of provision of Internet services in Malawi. The Sustainable Development Network Programme (SDNP) was put in place to help countries in facilitating access to information about sustainable development and also encouraging participation in decision making for sustainable development. The SDNP project enhanced the capacity of stakeholders to use computer mediated communications, including Internet and also enhanced capacity for open and participatory decision processes and strives to encourage local and community-based involvement in sustainable development IST-Africa (2017).

There were nationwide initiatives from the government, private and non-governmental organisations to reach the masses with ICT. MACRA implemented telecommunications infrastructure development through the establishment of telecentres in several rural areas of Malawi. The idea was to have at least one multipurpose community telecentre in each constituency where people have access to ICT enabled applications. Fifty-six telecentres were established from 2010 to 2013 and these telecentres are underutilised due to several challenges like slow internet connection and unreliable electricity Kapondera and Namusanya (2016, 13).

Malawi Library and Information Consortium (MALICO) pioneered the establishment of the Malawi Research and Education Network (MAREN). In 2005, MAREN was formed with the aim of establishing sustainable communication and networking among research and education institutions in Malawi. It launched its Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) technology for providing satellite access by giving academic institutions connectivity from the north to south of Malawi. Through the UbuntuNet Alliance, MAREN is a beneficiary under the Africa Connect eInfrastructure projects IST-Africa (2017). The availability of national and international fibre is a catalyst for the implementation of the physical network.

LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT

Libraries are important institutions in any organisation as they are sources of information, knowledge, and experiences which are selected, acquired, organised, preserved and disseminated to those who need them. Libraries are important tools to fill the growing gap between the information rich and the information poor. They are a visible sign of commitment to the sustainable development of communities in Malawi. There are many types of libraries in Malawi ranging from public, special, school, to academic libraries existing as supporting entities of institutions such as public and private schools, research institutions, government departments, statutory organisations, non-governmental organisations, and universities Salanje (2012, 3).

In 1994, Malawi announced universal primary education and school enrolment started to rise. Universal education had put pressure on class sizes, which were often over 100 pupils. Resources such as books and learning materials were stretched and education quality had suffered from those higher enrolments. Therefore, Book Aid International came in to assist and their main aim is to create access to books across the country. It has been supporting libraries in Malawi since 1962. In partnership with Malawi National Library Service (MNLS) which oversees public library services, Book Aid International books are distributed to a network of 16 branch public libraries of MNLS. MNLS also distributes books to primary and secondary schools, higher education institutions, medical institutions and other non-governmental organisations Book Aid International (n.d.). As books are difficult to obtain in Malawi, some institutions in rural areas are partnering with the African Library Project which provides books to communities especially rural primary schools. Although public libraries are available in some parts of Malawi through partnership with international organisations like Ripple Africa, public libraries are lagging behind due to inadequate support and lack of funds from the central government. This is evident when there are 16 government funded public libraries and 4 out of 16 are in partnership with Building Malawi. This implies that a larger proportion of rural communities do not have access to public library facilities hence this is creating a hindrance to information access.

ELECTRONIC INFORMATION DEVELOPMENT

MALICO was established in 2003. It facilitates the subscription to electronic resources and the production of local and relevant content for Malawi's repositories. MALICO has been working with international organisations like the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) and the Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL). INASP's main aim is to strengthen the capacity of individuals and institutions to produce, share and use research information and knowledge for sustainable development INASP (2019). EIFL's main purpose is to negotiate, encourage, and advocate for the wide availability of scholarly electronic information by library users from the education and research sectors, professional communities, governmental organisations, and the civil society Kupryte, Segbert-Elbert and Bernal (2005, 256). EIFL has been working in Malawi since 2001. It supported the creation of MALICO and the creation of open access repositories and journals EIFL (2019). MALICO, with the support from the INASP and EIFL, developed a proposal for the establishment of a digital repository for research in Malawi. This increases the visibility and accessibility of Malawi's local content on the Internet.

HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT

Library services have been termed as crucial in the provision of quality and relevant information to different sectors that strive to develop the nation of Malawi. A library is nothing without librarians, but just a collection of books (Ziba 2018). In 2002, Development Aid from People to People (DAPP) Malawi established a teacher training college. Apart from the teacher training programme, the teachers are also trained on how to manage a simple library as most freshly trained teachers are placed in rural primary schools. African Library Project is a partner of DAPP in the establishment of school libraries African Library Project (2018).

In order to promote libraries to be manned by professionals, Malawi Library Association (MALA) offers a certificate course and Mzuzu University offers Library and Information Science courses at diploma, bachelors and master's degree levels. As of 2019, over 1,000 students have graduated with a MALA certificate. As of 2019, over 200 students have graduated with diplomas, bachelors and masters' degrees in Library and Information Science (LIS) Mzuzu University Registry (2019). A study by Mapulanga (2014, 35), on prospects and constraints of staff development, indicated that all the libraries under the University of Malawi were headed by professional librarians with at least an undergraduate degree, while the majority of the support staff had a certificate in Library and Information Studies. Although more people are trained, challenges are still available as most libraries in rural areas are manned by people who have no professional development in librarianship. Ocholla (1999) indicates that graduates fear to work with the poor, the illiterate, and in rural areas.

CONCLUSION

On the global level, Malawi is making some strides in closing the gap between the information rich and the information poor of the communities. The extent to which Malawi is closing the gap is not encouraging, as Malawi is number 171 out of 189 countries in terms of human development. Several legislations like Access to Information Act, Copyright Act, and ICT Policy have the capacity to contribute access to information by communities in Malawi. The introduction of telecentres in the rural communities of Malawi could promote access to information. However, there are some challenges that are faced by the telecentres like slow internet which impedes the use of technology in information access. Although illiteracy level is decreasing due to free primary education and adult literacy education, still a good proportion of the population are illiterate and the effective use of technology usually requires new equipment, literacy as well as specialised training.

Although libraries, electronic information, and human resources have been developed, they are inadequate especially for the rural population. All in all, Malawi is not lagging behind in its endeavour to strive towards an information rich society, but as a country there is a need to re-examine the government's role in developing an information society, and to also train people by equipping them with 21st century skills if the country is to transform the society into a fully-fledged informed society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Malawi government should invest more in public libraries, telecentres, and technological infrastructure to make them true information resource centres for the rural poor.
- MALICO should press government to come up with a deliberate policy to ensure that all public and government libraries and information centres are manned by trained librarians in order to promote the use of information.

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