

Distribution: General

ECA-IFLA/CONF./2/8

27 April 2007

Original: English

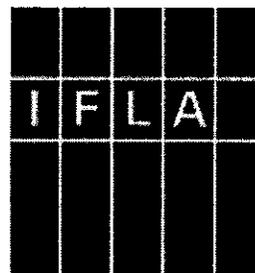
**UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL**

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Fifth Session of the Committee
on Development Information (CODI-V)

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
29 April – 04 May 2007

**Governance, Citizenship and Information Literacy Abilities in
Africa**



GOVERNANCE, CITIZENSHIP AND INFORMATION LITERACY ABILITIES IN AFRICA

**PAPER PRESENTED AT THE COLLOQUIUM ON INFORMATION LITERACY,
HOLDING AT THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA (ECA), ADDIS ABABA
ETHIOPA, FROM THE 29TH TO THE 31ST OF MARCH 2007.**

by

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Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the ongoing debate over the role of governance and citizenship in promoting information literacy abilities. In other words, to what extent have good governance and citizenship empowered people through knowledge creation and dissemination. The argument is that good governance and citizenship create the enabling or facilitative environment for the promotion of information literacy abilities, given the rather closed and authoritarian nature as well as poor information friendliness of most governments in Africa.

Against this background, this paper addresses a number of issues. First, it defines governance and citizenship and links them to how they are important in promoting information literacy abilities. Secondly, it discusses the measures put in place by African governments to empower people through knowledge creation and dissemination. Thirdly, it addresses some of the challenges encountered in empowerment through knowledge. Fourthly, it makes recommendations that will ensure that governance and citizenship value information literacy abilities than is currently the case.

What is governance?

Since the late 1980s the issue of governance has dominated the international discussion about development and international assistance to Africa. The problem of persistent underdevelopment in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is mainly due to the poor governance environment. A 1989 World Bank study, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* stated that: "Underlying the litany of Africa's development problems is a crisis of governance".

Governance can be understood in terms of three major components. First, the form of political authority that exists in a country (parliamentary or presidential; civilian or military and autocratic or democratic). Second, the means through which authority is exercised in the management of economic and social resources. Third, the ability of governments to discharge government functions effectively, efficiently and equitably through the design, formulation and implementation of sound policies and programmes. In short, governance refers to the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority to manage the affairs of a nation. Governance embraces all of the methods –

good or bad – that societies use to distribute power and manage public resources and problems. “Good” or “sound” governance is therefore a normative concept and a subset of governance that refers to norms of governance. The UNDP 1996 Workshop on Governance for Sustainable Human Development has identified 19 characteristics of good governance (see Box 1).

Box 1: Characteristics of Good Governance

- Participatory
- Sustainable
- Legitimate and acceptable to the people
- Transparent
- Promotes equity and equality
- Able to develop the resources and methods of governance
- Promotes gender balance
- Tolerates and accepts diverse perspectives
- Able to mobilise resources for social purposes
- Strengthens indigenous mechanisms
- Operates by rule of law
- Efficient and effective in the use of resources
- Engenders and commands respect and trust
- Accountable
- Able to define and take ownership of national solutions
- Enabling and facilitative
- Regulatory rather than controlling
- Able to deal with temporal issues
- Service-oriented

Source: UNDP, *Reconceptualising Governance*, Discussion Paper 2, New York, UNDP, 1997, p.

What is citizenship?

Citizenship is a relationship between the individual and the state in which the two are bound by reciprocal rights and duties. It connotes equality of rights and obligations. Citizens differ from subjects and aliens in that they are full members of their political community or state by virtue of their possession of basic rights (Heywood, 1997). A citizen is any person who enjoys full and equal rights as a member of the human community of which he or she is part, and by virtue of this discharges equally corresponding obligations. All citizens ought therefore to be equal in the rights and obligations they have (Ninsin, 1987). In other words, a citizen is a member of political community or state, endowed with a set of rights and a set of obligations. Citizenship is therefore the “public” face of individual existence. People are to participate in the life of their communities to the extent that they possess entitlements and responsibilities. Civil participation is, in turn, linked to the advance of constitutional government, as reflected in the extension of political rights and civil liberties.

In his classic contribution to the study of citizenship rights, T.H. Marshall (1950) distinguished between three bundles of rights: (a) civil rights, that is, rights necessary for individual freedom, eg. freedom of speech, assembly, movement, conscience and equality before the law; (b) political rights, that is, rights which give the individual the opportunity to participate in political life, eg., the right to vote, to stand for election and to hold public office; (c) social rights, that is, rights which guarantee the individual a minimum social status and therefore provide the basis for the existence of both civil and political rights. Social rights are those that enable the individual to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in a society (Marshall, 1950).

Citizenship is inseparable from democracy because citizenship implies the right of participation in one's government on the basis of equality. Equality means that democracy hinges on the equality of all citizens just as citizenship connotes equality of rights. The idea of equality also connotes fairness – justice. It means absence of discrimination, and of any or all obstacles which may hinder the peaceful enjoyment of rights by any citizen of the national community (Ninsin, 1987; Heywood, 1997).

What are information literacy abilities?

They refer to developing the capacity, skills and competencies of the individual to acquire knowledge through primary (media) and secondary sources (libraries) that will enable him/her to be abreast with issues and problems facing society. Indeed, the knowledge gained can assist the individual to make an input into public policy or programme through submission of a memorandum or discussion programme and thereby contribute to the governance of his/her society or community. In other words, information literacy skills empower the individual to participate in affairs affecting him/her.

What is the link between governance, citizenship and information literacy abilities?

The link between governance, citizenship and information literacy abilities cannot be over-emphasized. Information is a key public resource. There cannot be accountability, responsiveness and active citizenship without information. Governments are concerned with the quality of information they hold – including its accuracy and availability to the tax payers who have paid for it. In addition, they also have a responsibility to ensure that members of the public have the information they need to fulfill their rights and obligations (Brown, 2005). Indeed, the advent of e-governance or e-government, that is, the use of contemporary and communication technology to boost information dissemination, is to enhance service delivery and facilitate citizen participation in good governance (Holliday and Yep, 2005). Development partners regard information as a governance transformation and consequently, have paid considerable attention to the development potential of information creation, dissemination, storage and retrieval (Berman and Tettey, 2001; World Bank, 1999).

Above all, enhancing information literacy is one of the key ideas behind the move towards decentralization in most African states. Hanna and Schwere (1990: 253-255) have emphasized that:

... the general movement in most developing countries ... toward decentralizing decision making is contingent on improving management information systems in government to ensure monitoring and accountability at the central level and to encourage informed decision making at the local level.

It has been pointed out that access to information is one of the outcomes of decentralization. If decentralization is to be regarded as a success, it should help in keeping rural people, particularly the rural poor, informed of their rights and the opportunities available to them. This may not directly improve the basic conditions of life of the rural poor, but it will make an indirect contribution towards improving knowledge, choice and self-esteem (Ayee, 1996; Olowu and Smoke, 1991).

Information literacy abilities, therefore, constitutes a significant part of efforts by development partners to build the capacity of civil society organizations to monitor the state and hold it accountable to its citizens in order for the state to avoid the neo-patrimonialism that characterized its past performance (Tettey, 2002).

What are the strategies to empower people through knowledge creation and dissemination?

In most sub-Saharan African countries, a number of legal and institutional strategies have been put in place to empower people through knowledge creation and dissemination. They are as follows:

1. **Constitutional guarantee** in most constitutions of African states that the freedom to information is a fundamental human right. Whether countries have taken this stipulation seriously is another matter.
2. **Public education:** A number of countries have established constitutional bodies to promote and enhance civic education. They are mandated to inculcate in the citizens awareness of their civic responsibilities and an appreciation of their rights and obligations. Knowledge is power, the power to control and change one's destiny for the better. Public education has tended to remove some of the counterproductive effects of illiteracy as it creates the awareness and exposes the individual to understanding issues and problems of society. However, the effectiveness of the public education bodies has been undermined by politicization in the appointment of their members and inadequate resources to perform their functions.
3. **Decentralization:** Since the late 1980s, decentralization has featured on the development and governance agenda of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This is because of the beneficial outcome of decentralization such as accountability, responsiveness, participation, and accessing and incorporation of information on local needs, conditions and priorities into local development plans. However, the

role of decentralization in accessing information in the local areas is undermined by (a) inadequate devolution of power, particularly in staff and finance; (b) vague and/or inappropriate systems and procedures; (c) inadequately qualified, underpaid and unmotivated staff; (d) political interference, corruption and abuse of power and (e) lack of 'downward' accountability (Conyers, 2007).

4. ***The Media:*** Most constitutions in Africa guarantee the freedom and independence of the media, both public and private. The media provide the medium for the dissemination of information to the public. In addition, they afford fair opportunities and facilities for the presentation of divergent views and dissenting opinion. The state media in most African countries, however, are mostly not objective because in most instances, they have tended to be "praise-singers" of the government. The private media too, have also become polarized along partisan lines to the extent that their neutrality is compromised. There are also deliberate efforts by governments in some countries to gag the media through draconian libel laws.
5. ***Non-formal education:*** Given the high rate of illiteracy in most African countries which averages about 65%, governments since independence have adopted non-formal educational programmes to make people "literate". Adult literacy programmes had been carried out for the rural folks to read and write. These programmes were abandoned in most of the countries because of inadequate financial support from the Ministry of Education.
6. ***E-governance/government:*** E-government, the adoption of web-based technologies to deliver and conduct government services, has become a global trend in public administration. In 2006, there were about 2000 national governments that had their own websites. E-government often comes with a promise to improve public administration in terms of efficiency, one of the primary values of public administration. E-government is often viewed and promoted as a positive channel for enhancing government accountability and empowering citizens (La Porte et.al. 2000). More information delivered in a more timely fashion to citizens is expected to increase transparency of government, empowering citizens to more closely monitor government performance. Enhanced interactivity of the technology is also expected to improve government accountability as it makes government more responsive to the needs and demands of individual citizens (Wong and Welch, 2004).

However in spite of these arguments for e-government, in practice, it has not been seen to be so. Information technology in public organizations in Africa often simply improves their technical efficiency without leading to significant organizational changes (Berman and Tettey, 2001; Tettey, 2002). Instead of changing the nature of organizations, the role played by information technology is often no more than reinforcing "existing tendencies" of organizations. Research has shown that governments with authoritarian or paternalistic nature use web-based technologies to control access to information for the purpose of monitoring

citizen behaviour to tighten political control of the regime (Wong and Welch, 2004). From this perspective, the relationship between e-government and public accountability is a conditional one, where change in accountability levels depends on the context and characteristics of the public organization.

7. **Distance education:** Countries have embarked upon distance education programmes, which offer the potential to extend learning opportunities to people who would otherwise be denied a good education. Through these programmes, knowledge is disseminated while people's information literacy abilities are enhanced.
8. **Public libraries:** Public libraries have been created in most African states to share knowledge and dissemination information. A few countries have also established national libraries which act as the central point for information and knowledge.

What are the challenges?

Some of strategies have not worked because of the following challenges:

1. Lack of political commitment and support resulting in inadequate budgetary provision for information and absence of national information policies;
2. Inaccessibility to information as a result of the inability of most countries to pass laws on the right to information. Lack of openness on the part of government officials and their penchant for adhering to the administrative regulations such as "strictly confidential" have made it impossible for information access. This contrasts with the stipulation in the constitutions of the countries that the freedom to information is a fundamental right;
3. Improper documentation and record-keeping resulting in inability to retrieve information;
4. Illiteracy rate among majority of citizens in most African countries makes information literacy abilities difficult to imbibe;
5. The search for coping strategies to reduce poverty among rural folks have taken the better part of them and therefore there is no compelling urge or time devoted to information literacy;
6. Knowledge and information literacy abilities are costly ventures. They are not visible and therefore politicians are reluctant to have them as their top priority since they will not add to their legitimacy and sources of patronage; and
7. Misinformation and disinformation as result of improper reporting or briefing by officials in charge of information, such as presidential spokesmen and women (Alemna, 1998).

Conclusion: recommendations

There is no doubt that knowledge through information literacy abilities is key to development and good governance. Knowledge is equated to light that will illuminate the path of development. A country's development can be retarded by lack of attention to knowledge. According to the World Bank (1999:1) "... in 1957, Ghana and the Republic of Korea had virtually the same income per capita. By the early 1990s Korea's income per capita was six times higher than Ghana's. Some reckon that half of the difference is due to Korea's greater success in acquiring and using knowledge".

For African countries to make progress in the area of information literacy abilities, there is the need to do the following:

1. Institute policies such as efficient public investments in lifelong education opportunities, mechanisms for reducing information problems such as accounting standards, disclosure requirements, enforcing contract performance, through effective laws (World Bank, 1999).
2. More political commitment and support is needed to ensure that national information policies are designed and implemented and financial and other logistics provided.
3. Support from the private sector and other civil society organizations in funding information literacy skills because the public sector alone cannot shoulder the huge costs involved.
4. Create an information literacy climate in all organizations to sensitize key stakeholders on its utility.
5. There should be a holistic approach to supporting information literacy abilities rather than the current ad hoc and piecemeal approach which only tinkers with the process rather than going to the roots of it.

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