

# The Role of Community-Based Information Centers in Development: Lessons for Rural Zimbabwe

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**Abstract.** Community-based information proposals from the library profession in Zimbabwe should, in theory, fit well with government strategic goals for a 'knowledge-based society'. In reality, information technology has opened floodgates for national and international development by bringing in a plethora of community-based information systems and services. The concept of information centers has its roots in Ivan Illich's de-schooling education. This paper highlights developmental issues initiated by different community-based information centers elsewhere in the world and in Zimbabwe. It defines community, information, rural development and traces on community centers throughout their evolution to the modern community-based information centers. The premise of the paper is that establishing community-based information centers in Zimbabwean rural areas would strengthen and empower rural people to be among global players. The major focus of this paper is to provide a framework for establishing these centers in rural Zimbabwe for the purpose of providing everyone with useful, practical information for their developmental activities. Rural Zimbabwe has a bigger role in national and international development which can be achieved by harnessing community-based information systems and services. Despite low level penetration of community-based information centers in Zimbabwe, the Matabeleland South initiatives have capacitated Zimbabweans to follow the trend. The centers should be spread throughout the country to provide information for development. Community-based information centers can act as significant trajectories in meeting social and economic targets for rural people by connecting them to developmental programs. The paper finally shows how community information based centers complement efforts by the government and other agencies in resource sharing and enhancing services available through such centers.

**Keywords:** information; information technology; rural development; community-based information; rural Zimbabwe

## **Introduction**

Access to information is important as it is a driving force for modern society in

development projects. People need information to develop their potential through education and training, i.e. to succeed in business, to enrich their cultural experience, and to take control of their daily lives. Information is a key contributor to the development of individuals and communities. Yet access to information is not equal across the Zimbabwean community. Some people, particularly those living in affluent urban centers, can choose from abundant sources of information. In contrast, people who live in poor communities are frequently denied access to the information that they need to improve their lives. The position is particularly severe in many rural areas in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. The rapid development of the internet, in particular, has irrevocably changed the information landscape. Community-based information centers have evolved accordingly in response to both technological change and the increased sophistication of information provision. Setting up information centers in rural Zimbabwe has become an important mover for the development of the generality of the country.

### **De-institutionalizing information**

The idea of de-institutionalizing information is premised on Ivan Illich's de-schooling the "ineffectual nature of institutionalized education" at ([http://ournature.org/~novembre/illich/1970\\_deschooling.html](http://ournature.org/~novembre/illich/1970_deschooling.html), Accessed on 14/06/2013). According to Illich, the "School - the production of knowledge, the marketing of knowledge, which is what the school amounts to - draws society into the trap of thinking that knowledge is hygienic, pure respectable deodorized, produced by human heads and amassed in a stock" (Gajardo, 2000: 4) - hence a feat that can only be accessible with consistent attendance as recorded and affirmed by the register system in schools. Inconsistent attendance is viewed as pointer to lack of progress or as explanation for failure. The school walls thus, become a syndrome that creates false belief in learners that they can only learn when they are in the school and attending regularly. This false belief has been affirmed in Zimbabwe by the large numbers of Ordinary Level failures who throng teacher training colleges for bridging courses. The thinking behind this is that teacher training colleges, being institutions of higher learning, offer better service compared to schools.

The idea of de-schooling therefore is synonymous to Paulo Freire's de-intoxicating learning from the transmission model. This would create a permissive environment in which individuals begin to learn (be educated) rather than being schooled. We need to devolve from seeing education as a 'thing out there' but rather as an 'activity' and for this to happen, "the ethos, not just the institutions, of society ought to be 'de-schooled'" (Illich, 1971:55). Learners ought to develop self-belief that they are active agencies of knowledge creation than the learning institutions being places where knowledge resides. These institutions must play a catalyst role in activating learners to think and construct their own knowledge than memorize other people's thinking. For this purpose, Illich (1971) proposes setting up of educational webs which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning" ([http://ournature.org/~novembre/illich/1970\\_deschooling.html](http://ournature.org/~novembre/illich/1970_deschooling.html); downloaded on 14/06/2013).

Just like the misconception that learning is only possible in a school set-up, information has been ill-conceived as a privy for the educated and politicians. Information has, for long, been packaged in ways that create the notion that it is only accessible to a select group. This is done mainly through two processes, that is, the exclusionist languages that have been used to package the information and that the circulation points have mostly favored the educated and politicians who are mostly urbanites. For the majority of the rural folk, packaged information tends to elude them. In tandem with Illich's proposal, there is need to use advanced technology to support both learning and information dissemination. Information centers in rural areas could act as launch-pads for national debates and development at various levels and places. Languages that are accessible to each community should also be used to package the information to increase circulation. Increased access to information means increased debates on local and national activities per chance increasing productivity. De-institutionalizing information could prove to be one of the key movers that may unlock development in rural Zimbabwe.

### **Community-based information centers**

Community-based information points are centers of excellence. The term 'Information' normally, is a message communicated by a communicator to a receiver. Giggey (1988:11) defines community as "a group of people who have something in common. This can be their age, education, religion, interests, political affiliation, activities, work, possessions or a combination of two or more of these". Community-based information centers (CBIC) are information dissemination points for the survival and growth of the community, or the information required by members of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them. These members usually have some mutual obligation. The information service through which CBIC is provided to communities is called Community Information Service (CIS). Survival information, such as that which relate to health, agriculture, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunities and political rights can be communicated among the peoples of communities through CBICs.

The Cambridge Dictionary (2010) at <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/> (Accessed 20 July, 2012) defines development as when someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced. Malcolm (2003) says rural development generally refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of people living in relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. He argues that rural development has traditionally centered on the exploitation of land-intensive natural resources such as agriculture and forestry. However, changes in global production networks and increased urbanization have changed the character of rural areas. Increasingly tourism, niche manufacturers, and recreation have replaced resource extraction and agriculture as dominant economic drivers (Ward and Brown, 2009). Rural development is also characterized by its emphasis on locally produced economic development strategies. In contrast to urban regions which have many similarities, rural areas are highly distinctive from one another. For this reason there is a large variety of rural development approaches in Zimbabwe and other

places of the world. CBICs have the potential of transforming the livelihood of the rural folk.

### **The evolution of the centers**

The concept of establishing CBICs dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first attempts to improve access to information involved establishing collections of books and printed materials, what was then called community libraries. In the early 1970s, CBICs began to appear in some developed countries. Their focus was on acquiring, processing, storing and disseminating the information that was needed by the communities they served. They were, therefore, less passive than the community libraries.

The first examples of community based libraries as information centers were found in Africa in the 1960s. They were usually initiated and funded by development agencies, working in conjunction with national or public library systems that were, themselves, part of the colonial legacy. In the then Rhodesia, the Harare Public Library and Gweru Community-Based Library are cases in point. Community-based library services are still operating in some parts of Africa, and still continue to meet community needs (Mchombu and Cadbury, 2006). The basic aims of community libraries were to support the development of literacy skills and to supplement the formal education provision. Their focus was, therefore, usually on children and young people. Increasingly, however, they also played an important role in maintaining literacy skills among adults. The existence of community libraries often served as a catalyst for more wide-ranging information based activities. In Peru in South America, for example, the network of community libraries, *bibliotecas rurales*, has developed into an educational and cultural movement that incorporates literacy activities, local language publications, reading and learning (Ortiz, 1996). Perhaps because of the relatively high capital costs involved, the provision of community libraries was usually made by a government agency, such as a national or public library service, and often with assistance from an aid agency. As such, many of the centers were managed as part of the management structure of the sponsoring agency. This is the case with Zimbabwean community-based libraries. The National Library and Documentation Services (NLDS) working with the National Free Library facilitated the establishment of 41 school/community libraries. However, these libraries are only located in Matabeleland South Province of Zimbabwe.

### **Community-Based Information Centers (CBICs)**

In common with developments in mainstream library services, there was a shift towards more dynamic centers that were concerned with the collection and provision of information rather than simply with the management of collections of books. These community-based information centers began to emerge in the early 1970s and a number are still providing valuable services today. Their focus was on acquiring, processing, storing and disseminating the information that was needed by the community that they served. The emphasis was on taking the information to the people who needed it most. There was a corresponding need to identify and satisfy information needs within the community. This rather more dynamic role implied the need for trained information staff. This reflected recognition of the importance of oral information and an oral culture in rural

communities. Initially, the focus of these centers was firmly on the needs of local businesses, particularly agriculture.

The aim was to provide individuals and communities with access to national and international information sources. The services were often, therefore, developed in partnership between an international organization, such as the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, or the International Rice Research Institute, and a country's Ministry of Agriculture. In the 1980s and 1990s, attention began to shift towards the need to meet the daily information requirements of individuals. This was especially true in areas like health, social empowerment, community development and information networking. As Tadesse and Genesse (2002) note, CBICs seek to enhance development and reduce poverty in the region through providing much needed information, particularly in the areas of agriculture and health.

### **Tele-centers and Community IT centers**

During the 1980s, when Zimbabwe was celebrating its independence, the nature of community information centers began to reflect the growing importance of information and communication technology in creating, storing, transmitting and communicating information. Tele-centers and Community IT centers became the new buzz-words in the information field. The technology, however, was still mainly analogue consisting of telephones and fax machines, photocopiers, duplicators and printers. Many communities lacked these basic resources and strenuous efforts were made to establish resource centers in urban and rural communities. The main focus of tele-centers and IT centers was on meeting the information needs of the local business community, particularly subsistence farmers.

As time moved on, however, there was an emerging recognition of the need to develop IT-handling skills, particularly among children and young people. The nature of the centers also changed. Initially they were places where professionals, or people trained in basic information skills used the technology to acquire, process and store information on behalf of the community and its members. Gradually, a self-service style of operation began to emerge: people went to the centers to use the technology to satisfy their own information needs. The Indian Government, for example, has done much to support the development of tele-centers in rural areas. In 2000 it launched a programme establishing nearly 500 centers in the north-eastern region of the country. Each was equipped with computers, printers, a generator and a satellite link for internet access. The centers are manned by two trained operators and have the potential to be used for a very wide range of activities (Harris and Rajora, 2006). However, resource limitations and other constraints such as the time and cost involved in setting up and maintaining equipment means that such centers in developing countries such as Zimbabwe are faced with a lot of problems.

### **Multipurpose Community Tele-centers**

Multipurpose Community Tele-centers reflected the way that technology changed, particularly the development of the internet, had greatly extended the

range of activities that could be undertaken by tele-centers. It is now the most common type of centre, and examples can be found in South Africa, Botswana, and the Asia-Pacific region, as well as in more developed European countries and North America. The primary drive was to provide opportunities for the community to use ICT for a wide range of purposes, not just as a means of acquiring, processing and storing information. The centers were often built around training in the use of the internet, computers and associated technology. Some sought to provide services to the whole community (Proenza, Buch and Montero, 2001) while others have focused on particular groups within the community such as women (International Telecommunication Union, 2004). The centers were increasingly initiated by community-based organizations and supported by a wide range of local, regional and national government agencies, along with sponsorship from private sector companies and charitable organizations.

In other cases, the centers have been established by an outside agency that has sponsored the development in order to uplift targeted communities, for example, the US Information Corner in Zimbabwe. Good examples elsewhere are the centers that have been established by the Population and Community Development Association (PDA) of Thailand. The centers are equipped with computers, printers, along with an internet connection. The main purpose of the centers is to provide training in computing and the use of ICT. They offer a range of courses for the community and for local organizations. The centers also serve as a community facility and members of the community are encouraged to use the equipment. At an international level, the International Telecommunication Union and UNESCO have played an important role in promoting the concept of multipurpose community telecentres. UNESCO has produced a useful, practical guide to their establishment and operation (UNESCO, 2003) in given countries.

### **Community Multi-media Centers**

The functions of community-based information and technology centers have changed over time from community libraries, with their emphasis on building collections of books, to the multipurpose community tele-centers where information and communication technology is used for a wide range of purposes. Since 2000 a further function was added to those outlined above, that is information broadcasting. A community multimedia center combines local radio by local people in local languages with a public tele-center facility offering access to internet, e-mail, computer training and a range of services and activities that meet development needs (UNESCO, 2005). In some cases, tele-centers were added to community radio stations; in others, radio was added to existing tele-centers. This development reflects the emergence of new opportunities to use digital information and associated media to disseminate information. Digital technology enables local people in small, remote communities to take control of the local, regional, national and even international information that they receive, customizing it to meet their particular requirements. Content of all types can be relayed in local languages to meet local needs.

### **Community Learning Centers**

In recent years, with the growth of the internet and the transition to information and knowledge-based societies, people have become more and more conscious of the importance of learning and knowledge sharing as a basic need for social and economic development. Community information and technology centers have always contributed, in one way or the other, to social and economic processes. In recent years, more importantly, a number of community learning centers have been established with the specific purpose of providing a variety of learning opportunities that can empower people within their communities and improve their quality of life (UNESCO, 2006). In developing countries, UNESCO has done much to foster the development of community learning centers under its Programme of Education for All. The centers recognize the importance of non-formal, lifelong learning and the development of skills. The centers provide support for children and young people moving through the formal education system. They also make significant provision for adult and continuing learners. This, hitherto, was what Illich proposed a couple of years back. Community learning centers are increasingly initiated by community-based organizations and supported by a wide range of local, regional and national government agencies, particularly education ministries, and by UNESCO in developing countries.

### **Purposes of community-based information centers**

The common purpose that underlies all the community based information centers is to achieve equal access to information, or, at least, to reduce levels of inequality. The importance of information has seen rapid growth in recent years with the aim to create information and knowledge-based communities. Community-based information centers aim to provide community development information and business services to remote communities. CIBCs provide access to internet-enabled computers, development of online community software based on the local information needs, fax machines, printers, copiers, telephones, televisions and radios. In addition, there could be a mobile library with books and daily newspapers and magazines in rural Zimbabwean communities. This would act as gateways to information on topical and daily activities. Community based information centers have one thing in common: they bring new learning opportunities to those who otherwise lag behind in the increasingly information-wired world. Lack of access to information can severely constrain personal development through education. It can impair the efficiency and competitiveness of businesses, whether those of subsistence farmers or more ambitious entrepreneurs. It can limit a community's cultural life leading to lack of experience creating narrowness of vision. Perhaps most significant of all, this can prevent individuals from taking control of their daily lives, their health and their well-being, as well as denying them exercising their rights as citizens (Sullivan, Kone, Senturia and Chrisman, 2001). Such was the case in Zimbabwe for Matabeleland South Province where such an endeavor was embarked on as a pilot project. The pilot project, however, suffered greatly from under-funding and lack of visionary implementers.

The importance of information has grown in recent years with the transition to information and knowledge-based communities. This is a phenomenon that can be seen all over the world. The development of these information-based societies

hold the prospect of economic growth and social improvement but, all too often, it produces within the overall population disadvantaged groups who are excluded because they lack access to information. Societies are becoming polarized into those who have access to information – the information-haves – and those who do not – the have-nots. This situation is usually compounded by a digital divide where people lack access to the technology that, increasingly, is required in order to obtain and use information. It is the view of these researchers that such is the case in most rural Zimbabwe. The information centers that have sprout in growth-points need to be developed to accommodate every Jack and Jill in the rural areas. It can be noted at this point that Econet, among other mobile service providers, has made a commendable effort to bring information to most rural points. However, this effort is being curtailed by the expensive mobile handsets that people have to purchase for them to access information.

The more individuals, communities and whole societies depend on information and the associated technologies, the greater is the social exclusion that is experienced by those who do not have access to the technology and the wherewithal to use it. As if this were not bad enough, matters are made worse by the tendency for educated people and those with skills to leave the disadvantaged rural communities and move to the cities; rural-urban migration. In effect, this increases the social and technological exclusion for those who remain in the rural areas. In Zimbabwe, there is, therefore, a great need to reduce the level of inequality in people's access to information. Establishment of community-based centers that are designed to provide people with access to information is a necessary move that will certainly cater-pool societal growth. Such centers have been established elsewhere in disadvantaged communities all over the world – they are a global phenomenon hence can be set up in rural Zimbabwe as well.

### **The Zimbabwean rural populace benefits from community information centers**

Information and communication activities are a fundamental element of any rural development activities. Rural areas are often characterized as information-deprived though information provision has always been a central component of rural development initiatives. The rural poor typically lack access to information vital to their lives and livelihoods (Chapman and Slaymaker, 2002). Zabeed, Mushi and Ahmad (1997) suggest that,

[. . .] in a country like Bangladesh with an agro-based rural economy, rural development can play a major role in national development. Therefore, quick and easy access to information is vital to the development of the rural community.

The flow of information from and to the rural based communities is an essential pre-condition for the development of rural Zimbabwe towards eradication of widespread poverty. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) greatly facilitate the flow of information and knowledge offering the socially-marginalized communities unprecedented opportunities to attain their own entitlements (Akbar, 2004). As a result, urban people are benefiting from the



new ICT-based economy, but the poor, disadvantaged and marginalized rural population does not have access to the information superhighway. Owing to limited infrastructure in Zimbabwe, people living in rural areas cannot afford to have these facilities. However, help could be possibly at hand with the establishment of community-based information centers as a way to enable rural communities to access information key to development (Mahmood, 2005).

In Zimbabwe, the idea is to establish thousands of tele-centers throughout the country so that all citizens of the country would have access to communication, information and other services for improving their livelihoods and quality of life. These tele-centers, once established in rural areas, will provide a range of services focused on the needs of rural residents and will bring profound impact on rural life that include creating social awareness, eradicating poverty, empowering women, opening the door for financial activities and eliminating digital divide. As a result, the underprivileged and marginalized people living in the remote areas would immensely benefit from these initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

Creating awareness through provision of information products and services to the rural people is an essential component for development. It seems that rural people in Africa are not always aware of what information entails (Manzvanzvike, 1993). Economic development in Zimbabwe can only be achieved by harnessing these information synergies and uplifting the rural-based information centers. However, information on its own may be useless unless we create linkages through information-based websites which can connect the rural people with markets for their products, money transfer, job applications and weather information. Information has power only when used and applied effectively. Information plays such an important role in almost every human activity; its value in the development process has been a topic of extensive debate. Community-based information centers are therefore a panacea to national development when intervened with proper usage.

### **Declaration**

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