PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND PROJECT EVALUATION FOR AFRICAN RURAL INFORMATION SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years something that could be called a Rural Information Services movement has grown up in Africa. Since Amadi attacked existing library and information services as 'colonial brainwashing'[1] and Mchombu called for a 'librarianship of poverty'[2] in the early 1980s, there has been a steady, and increasing, trickle of books, articles and reports devoted to this topic. There has also been a number of conferences and workshops on the theme. Probably the most complete synthesis of this rural information services theme was published in 1998 with the second edition of Sturges and Neill's book, The quiet struggle.[3] In this it is suggested that the movement is influential in most countries of East, Southern and West Africa. It is found in the Anglophone countries, and it also exists in particularly lively form in Francophone West Africa. Ideas and experience from the Francophone countries have been drawn together very effectively by Ndiaye in his Communication à la base.[4]

These two books show that the movement has produced speculative writing, much exhortation, some research, and some experimentation. The speculation has been fruitful, much of the exhortation fatuous, the research helpful and stimulating, but it is the experimentation that is now most important. Rural information services have actually been introduced into a large number of African countries. For instance, in Zimbabwe an NGO, the Rural Library and Resource Development Project (RLRDP), has approaching 100 centres in operation, and in Tanzania there is a national service with thousands of centres. The movement is now much more than a matter of words. Diana Rosenberg was therefore clearly quite right to ask in 1993 if such services were sustainable beyond an experimental phase.[5] To respond to the question it is necessary to have some hard information about the performance of existing rural information services.

This paper will look briefly at the mission of rural information centres, so as to establish the baseline for assessing them. It will then look at sources of ideas and experience in measuring the success of services, both from within and outside the library and information sector, before reviewing some examples of this kind of research that have already taken place. In conclusion some lessons will be drawn on performance measurement and project evaluation, and their place in the whole process of providing rural information services which are well matched to need.

THE IDEA

The concept of rural information services stems from the idea that information is a human right owed as much to the poor, illiterate, isolated and neglected rural dweller as the prosperous, well-educated and privileged member of an urban elite. It is also the case that in a democracy, citizens not only have rights but responsibilities towards the community and the nation, which they can only meet effectively if they are properly informed. Although this article deals with the idea in reference to the rural population of developing countries, it should be remembered that it is also relevant to the urban masses, often recent immigrants from the countryside, who cluster in the slums and shanty towns of the cities.

The form that such information services most commonly take in developing countries is that of extension (or, in Francophone countries, *vulgarisation*) services. Extension services are essentially a one-way, top-

down, transfer of information to the community. Their content is most commonly agricultural, consisting of advice and information on farming techniques and improvements. The services are quite explicitly intended to contribute to economic development. When they function effectively, it can be shown that they have affected productivity and profitability, at least of some sectors of the community. However, it is not this kind of targeted, one-way communication system that is the subject of this paper. The extension agents are not properly equipped to respond to enquiries on health and hygiene, family finances, education and other matters. We are concerned here with the provision of information services that are designed to be responsive to expressed information needs, and to deal with the widest possible range of subjects.

Unfortunately when we look at what is said about library and information services in developing countries, and about rural information services in particular, we find that there is a problem. A whole series of writers have anticipated the answer to the question about the viability of information services. They have assumed that, in the first place, the services are indeed viable and, secondly, gone on to allege, without a shred of real proof, that this type of service makes a vital impact on the process of national development. Take for instance Alemna in the proceedings of a recent conference on 'The Role of Libraries in Economic Development'. In this he suggests that 'it goes without saying that the proper organisation of library and information resources is a necessary condition for economic growth and development'.[6] This has never been proven and is pretty certainly not true when formulated in this way. Saying it does not help make a stronger case for library and information services: it merely undermines the process of creating a sensible argument.

It is time to accept Menou's contention that 'We can no longer be satisfied with the endless repetition of the axiom that information is an essential resource for development.'[7] The IDRC book on the wider impact of information on development, from which this quotation is taken, makes excellent progress towards finding ways to measure impact. However, such measures depend on practical assessments of the success of particular projects. It is this type of practical assessment that is the concern of the present paper.

Two main approaches to assessment are available. The commercial sector applies performance monitoring research to the products and services that it markets. The more common way of referring to this in the library and information sector is 'performance measurement'. In the public sector the concept of evaluation is widely used with reference to development projects. The important thing to note is that while performance measurement offers sophisticated approaches and powerful research tools, project evaluation has been highly effective in the specific conditions of developing countries. Despite this distinction, the literatures of both performance measurement and project evaluation offer a good deal of help to the professional who wishes to measure performance and form a judgement of the value of services.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

As suggested earlier, performance measurement is closely related to the performance monitoring research that the commercial sector uses to complete the marketing cycle. It enables the goals and plans for the marketing of a product or service to be compared with actual performance. Using its results, decisions can be made on whether to continue, modify or replace existing products and services. Whilst it might be interesting to trace the development of performance monitoring research in the marketing literature, for our purposes it is really only necessary to look at the significant contributions to the literature of performance measurement in libraries. These can be dated back to the 1960s and the work of Morse on library effectiveness,[8] and King and Bryant's study of information service evaluation.[9] The literature grew swiftly and included many contributions on the identification of 'indicators' which would enable assessments to be made. Typical indicators might be size and content of collections, range of services offered, registered membership figures, number of loans and enquiries, success rate in responding to requests and enquiries, cost of transactions, and many others. These indicators are intended to throw light on the relations between users, information services, and their funding bodies. The work on indicators

which has taken place since has become increasingly sophisticated, and this can be judged from Goodall's survey of the first twenty years of this type of research.[10]

In the early 1990s a number of significant publications improved the tools available to those who sought to measure and evaluate performance. Griffiths and King's <u>Keys to success</u>[11] shows how a whole range of indicators can be developed, and their <u>Manual on the evaluation of information centers and services</u>[12]concentrates on how indicators of this type should be used in practice. The second edition of Lancaster's <u>If you want to evaluate your library</u>[13] was an important practical guide to the implementation of the evaluation process. Since then, the number of publications has continued to multiply. Suffice it to mention good practical treatments by Brophy and Coulling from Britain[14] and Hernon and Altman from the USA[15]. Kebede has also put together a useful survey of the literature for the use of developing countries.[16]

Despite this last title, the literature of performance measurement is overwhelmingly concerned with library and information services in the industrialised countries. In these countries the scope for gathering and presenting statistical and qualitative data is abundant. We find trained personnel, awareness of techniques, computer facilities, and a public entirely familiar with market research and opinion testing. Most of these aspects are absent in less developed countries, so that the more sophisticated and expensive techniques are not always capable of export.

PROJECT EVALUATION

Evaluation is a broader concept than measurement and when it is applied to development projects it is aimed at identifying the wider social impact of a project. But before anything can be said about wider impacts, it is necessary to assess the immediate success or failure of a project, to monitor its performance and establish whether it provides worthwhile immediate outcomes. A full evaluation would then go on to seek some indication as to whether community interest is strong enough to encourage community action and involvement in the establishment and maintenance of permanent services. This distinction between evaluation and measurement is important, but more important than this is that the spirit of project evaluation is different from that of performance measurement. The origin of the former is in public sector projects, whilst that of performance measurement originates in business management.

Project evaluation has unfortunately not always been a successful aspect of development activity. Robert Chambers in his account of 'How outsiders learn' was justifiably scathing about research on rural area of developing countries generally.[17] What he said certainly applied to much project evaluation work. However, since then a good deal of attention has been paid to the evaluation of projects by development agencies. Quite a large and helpful literature of development project evaluation has been published in recent years and this includes practical manuals intended for use in the field.

Project evaluation became widely used in the development field in the late 1970s and early 1980s, adopting ideas and techniques acquired from the longer-established traditions in other sectors. By 1982, for instance, a special issue of Reading University's Rural Development Communications could be devoted to the subject of evaluation.[18] By then the concept of participatory evaluation was already familiar. The manager of a project was encouraged to involve the community in the process, rather than looking at the project from an external perspective. This is important because it emphasises the distinction between research for research's sake and evaluation for the community's sake.

The participatory movement in development is concerned with the involvement of the community in the selection, planning and implementation of projects. It is also concerned with what is referred to as participatory research. Participatory research is well explained in the methodological work of Moris and Copestake[19] and illustrated in a book like Scoones and Thompson's collection on participatory work in agriculture.[20] Many of the projects described have some sort of information aspect and it is easy to see

how the approach can be used in relation to library and information projects. The techniques of investigation tend to be informal and capable of rapid use in the field. They derive their reliability from what is known as triangulation. This is the use of a number of different research techniques so as to reflect the subject of the study from different directions, testing the results against each other and building up a richer, more informative picture in the process. It is an approach which the first author has tested and found valuable in a small study of rural information needs and use in Malawi.[21]

The participatory principle is firmly embedded in the literature of project evaluation. A classic text is Feuerstein's Partners in evaluation.[22] The book explains what evaluation is for, and why the participation of the community is important. It illustrates how participation means much more than members of the community providing answers to a researcher's questions. The community should be involved at all stages of the exercise, and have full access to the knowledge gained as a result. The techniques are explained in clear language with examples and lively visual illustrations. In fact, there is no reason why an investigation, using the book as a guideline, should not be initiated and completed entirely within the community itself. Development agencies, for example Oxfam[23] and the Charities Evaluation Services,[24] have also sponsored similar practical manuals.

Up until recently, the important question has been whether there is specific help for evaluation of in the field of rural library and information services projects. Two publications, one more theoretical and the other more practical, go along way towards answering this need. Menou's book (cited earlier) concerns itself with the attempt to understand the impact of information on development, but a Unesco manual published in 1997 is aimed more at the practical implementation of measurement procedures.[25] It first of all identifies the expectations of rural information services and describes indicators against which the expectations can be measured. The 24 indicators are divided into groups: information availability; use; user satisfaction; local control over information flow; economic and social impact; quality of the knowledge base; and participation in government and its programmes. As is apparent, these cover the range from inputs through to impact. Even though it might be difficult to collect good data on all of these, the message is clear. The best possible data on projects and services must be obtained. We can also use the principles set out in the manual to review evaluations that were carried out in the past.

MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION IN PRACTICE

The importance of practical examples would seem almost too obvious to need stating, but as Alemna points out 'Accounts of actual evaluations made of libraries or information services are very few, despite the theoretical expositions'.[26] Obtaining original reports of research, as opposed to published summaries, is not easy. Yet a worthwhile critique cannot really be developed on summaries. This makes the three examples discussed here even more important than their actual content would suggest. The examples are from Tanzania, Botswana and Malawi. Each will be outlined briefly, and examined for the lessons it offers to other investigators.

The Tanzanian Rural Libraries[27]

The Tanzanian example is important because the work with rural libraries in the country is comparatively well established. Since the early 1970s a major government-supported and externally funded adult literacy programme has been reinforced by rural libraries in the wards (groups of four or five villages) and by the publication of rural newspapers in local languages. The Unesco evaluation was funded by NORAD (the Norwegian development agency). It took place at the beginning of 1992. A team of three from the USA, Norway and Tanzania spent 10 days in the field, preceded by time spent examining documents and interviewing officials and project workers. The terms of reference included an assessment of the contribution of the libraries to the maintenance of literacy skills, and the libraries' continuing relevance to the needs of target groups and government development objectives. At the time of the investigation there

were just over 3000 rural libraries. They had collections of books and pamphlets on development-related topics, such and health and agriculture. These had been sent by the Ministry of Education to the communities, and were made available in whatever kind of room could be found for the purpose. The rural libraries programme was quite distinct from the Tanzania National Library Service.

The report provides a great deal of valuable background information on the libraries, plus basic statistics on the types of premises used, the number of registered users, numbers of publications held by the libraries, and some figures for loans. From this we obtain a picture of libraries with small and dull collections, few registered readers and even lower levels of recorded use. The investigators sought to say something about the reading and learning that took place in those villages that had libraries. For this purpose they interviewed village development workers and members of the village community itself. The report refers to four library visits and other village visits, which included talking to three registered library users in Nyanguge Ward and eight in Mwamanyili Ward, plus four villagers in Buigiri Ward. The team obtained little positive feedback from the community. Thus in Buigiri Ward, two of the four community members reported using the library sometimes, but revealed little enthusiasm for what they found there. This is not surprising as, although the stock consisted of nearly 2000 items, it was infrequently added to, the range of topics was restricted and times of access were limited. A group discussion with readers in Mwamanyili did produce some interesting comments, including a little detail of what they read and what they would like (up-to-date books in simple English on topics like history, politics and science).

Without even seeking to assess the findings of the report, it is clear that the qualitative aspects of the investigation were thoroughly impressionistic. Since there is hardly any output data in the report, the few face-to-face contacts obtained were required to stand for this whole important area of investigation. Although the report did make some sensible suggestions as to how the rural libraries might be developed, none of these could be based on community opinion, since that had scarcely been explored. The project had, in effect, collected basic facts and outsiders' opinions about the rural libraries, but had not done any kind of performance monitoring research. Furthermore, the report was certainly not 'An impact evaluation' as its title claimed.

The Botswana Village Reading Rooms[28]

This study was commissioned by the Botswana National Library Service (BNLS) and was completed in January 1995. It reported on the Village Reading Rooms (VRRs) the first of which had been set up in 1986 on an experimental basis. At the time of the study there were 54 VRRs. The explicit aim of the study was to assess their relevance, and the adequacy of their management, resources and facilities. For this, the investigators needed to be able to look at the whole spectrum of inputs, processes, outputs and impacts. Although the report does contain basic statistical data on inputs and processes, this was admitted to be somewhat inadequate because of poor record keeping within the system. An analysis of the collections, when set against explicit statements of community needs obtained from the qualitative parts of the study, suggests that there was a poor match between stock and needs. Materials were supplied to the VRRs on the judgement of library staff based at the BNLS headquarters, but this seems not to have worked well.

Community opinion was the main focus of the project. Interview schedules and questionnaires were developed, so as to obtain views from those involved with the administration of the system, and the community generally (including both users and non-users of the services). The aim was to interview about 50 community members from around the location of 21 of the VRRs. This aim was met by using a team of trained interviewers who obtained a total of nearly 1000 responses. It is important to note that this effectively consisted of two studies. About half of those who responded were users and half were non-users. Although their responses are reported separately, the source of some of the views and experiences reported is not always stated prominently enough. The reader is therefore sometimes confused as to whether a particular point relates to users, non-users or the whole community. There also remains some doubt about how representative the non-users were of the broader community outside those who used the VRRs. Such criticisms apart, a clear and useful picture emerges.

Those who used the VRRs did so very often did so in connection with literacy education, particularly improvement of their English. Practical information was sought, but less often. A high proportion of users were school children who reported that the VRRs met their needs to a satisfactory extent. Adults who expressed dissatisfaction, tended to do so because many VRRS were in school premises. Adults also found too few books that were suitable for adult use. Non-users knew the VRRs existed, but many of them were not literate or too involved with work and domestic activities to visit a VRR. Non-users were often unsure of what was on offer there and asked for more effective publicity. Community leaders, such as chiefs and headmen had usually been consulted during the setting up of VRRs, but community workers, such as Village Extension Workers, had seldom had a strong involvement. They often felt that their skills and community links could have been used to good effect.

In summary, the study was strong on aspects of the outputs and impacts of the VRRs. Even though the VRRs were provided by BNLS, a national institution, and although the investigators were outsiders, the study seems to reflect community opinion convincingly. If better detail were available about the inputs to the service, the study could form a reasonably secure basis for management action.

The Malawian Rural Community Information Centres[29]

Some experience from Malawi is also described here to show that, although one might have reservations about the two evaluations described above, merely completing an evaluation in rural conditions is worthy of respect. In 1995 the Ulverscroft Foundation, a British charitable organisation interested in books and reading, granted its Munford Research Award for an evaluation of the Malawian Rural Community Information Centres (RCICs). The RCICs are small centres of a similar kind to those in Tanzania or Botswana. The Malawi National Library Service (MNLS) has a supervisory function, and distributes the stock. This consists of booklets on practical topics in Chichewa, the national language, produced by writers' workshops. The problems facing the investigation were fundamentally those also experienced in Tanzania and Botswana, but in this case the project was not completed successfully.

The chief reason for this seems to have been an over-ambitious plan to treat this as an almost entirely qualitative study, using interviews and focus groups. The intention was reasonable enough in itself, but the need for an underpinning of statistical data and descriptive information was neglected. The research instruments for use in interviews and with focus groups, although said to have been sent for comment to practising researchers and tested in the field, were clearly inadequate for their purpose. To compound this, the arrangements made for the fieldwork were inadequate. Communities were not always alerted before the survey team arrived. In these cases the necessary orderly sequence of procedures could not take place and it was not always possible to collect data. Not surprisingly the results from these visits were virtually valueless. The sheer difficulties of field research in an African environment seem to have been forgotten or underestimated. A good conceptual structure and very careful planning and preparation are essential in any research, as are sound logistics. However, in rural Africa the logistical demands are stronger by far and often call for resourceful reaction to field conditions. Researchers in the European countryside or the suburbs of an American city will seldom have had to find a team of volunteers to carry their car over a partially damaged bridge on the only road to the community to be studied. Whilst appropriate official clearance will be needed in most research circumstances, it will not usually call for establishing relations with a hereditary chief or a spirit medium.

MNLS was disappointed in its hope that this project would provide useful guidance for the administration and development of the RCICs. Its reaction has been to make sure that its own evaluation of its services has gone back to basics. It has re-emphasised the need for record keeping as a source of useful statistics. The new Chiwamba Community Information Centre, for instance, now keeps a full log of activities, which could eventually contribute to a future evaluation. It makes sense in most circumstances to restrict the scope of investigations unless they can build on good statistics collected over a reasonable period of time.

LESSONS

Seen as practical evaluations, both the completed studies have some positive qualities. They do tell the reader something useful about the success or failure of the programmes they concern. There is enough in either to make some worthwhile management decisions possible. In this they are quite typical of the majority of project evaluations carried out over the years. However, there is not much more to say that is positive: the studies do not tell us all we really want to know. The planning of measurement and evaluation needs to be much more rigorous than it was in either of these cases. Additionally, we would argue that the spirit of evaluation in developing countries needs to be strongly participatory.

The participatory principle has indeed been adopted by many development agencies so as to improve the quality of the knowledge they acquire from project evaluations. The societies of developing countries operate in distinctive and complex ways that are not necessarily receptive to research based on principles worked out in industrialised societies. By handing some of the initiative back to the community itself, there is a stronger possibility of obtaining a genuine response and useable data. It is clear that the examples of research described here completely lacked a significant participatory element.

Seen as performance measurement for the purposes of assessing and re-assessing the marketing of a product (the library and information services), there are also serious limitations to the two completed evaluations. The Tanzanian research examined the product in the market, found it not performing successfully, but did not go on to explore consumer opinion as to whether such a product was needed at all, whether modifications of the product might satisfy needs, or whether an alternative product might be appropriate. The Botswana research did test consumer opinion quite extensively. However, the parameters of the investigation were set so as to make it difficult to obtain any radically different views on the original need for a service. Nor was the study open to ideas on possible alternative strategies. In both examples the research fell short of the true character of marketing research. No successful company will launch a product for which the public has not already revealed some enthusiasm, and it will certainly not continue to market a product if initial hopes for its performance are not met.

The evaluations of library and information services described above clearly fall short of the standards of both performance measurement and project evaluation. There is no need for future investigations to share these limitations. The Unesco manual, cited earlier, provides ample guidance on indicators that will enable researchers to study the whole scope of a library or information service's performance in a rural area. If data for these indicators is collected in a participatory spirit, then the findings of the study ought to show whether the service is truly sustainable, or indicate what alternatives might be more appropriate. There is no obvious incompatibility between a broad concept of evaluation, which would seek eventually to measure social impact, and performance measurement for specifically marketing purposes. The two complement each other in the context of rural societies. A judicious blend of approaches and techniques is likely to be the best way in which research can make a useful contribution to decision-making on the provision of better library and information services in the rural areas of Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Rural information services on a less formal plan than conventional library service have been advocated in Africa since the early 1980s. Since then considerable experimentation with such services has taken place in many countries, for example Tanzania and Zimbabwe. So far, little formal assessment of such services has been attempted. Performance measurement, derived from marketing concepts, and project evaluation, with an emphasis on community participation, both offer lessons for such assessment. Significant practical literature from each of these approaches is briefly reviewed. Three examples of evaluations, from Tanzania, Botswana and Malawi, are then examined in the light of what the literature suggests. It is concluded that a blending of ideas and techniques from both approaches should be used in future evaluations.

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