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The power of information: can NGOs in Zimbabwe take up the gauntlet and wield this weapon in the war against HIV/AIDS?

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The HIV/AIDS NGO sector in Zimbabwe brings hope to a nation grappling under immense economic problems and citizens succumbing to the ravages of the HIV/AIDS endemic. UNAIDS envisage that information and knowledge management is one of methods that has been tested and is one of the best ways to harness both tacit and explicit information related to all aspects of the epidemic. To test this notion a survey was conducted amongst 64 HIV/AIDS NGOs based in the capital city of Zimbabwe. Data was collected using questionnaires, key informant interviews, observation methods, and correlated with data collected from documentary sources. The study indicates that information and knowledge management is generally not well practised in the HIV/AIDS NGO sector of Zimbabwe. Skills shortage in information services management has had a negative impact on HIV/AIDS information dissemination. It is argued that measures are needed to assist HIV/AIDS scientific interventions. It was established that a sound information management policy and information technology developments were needed to address the information service challenges. In addition, poor networking among NGOs was observed. There was a strong indication that information technology tools (ICTs), and the Internet were not fully utilised despite their availability. Based on the research outcomes, the researcher thus proposes that an information and knowledge management policy should be developed for the HIV/AIDS sector in Zimbabwe. The study recommends development and management of a national web portal and online HIV/AIDS database.

Keywords: Information Science, Information Management, ICTs, HIV/AIDS, Information Dissemination, Zimbabwe

1 INTRODUCTION

HIV/AIDS is the scourge of Africa and Zimbabwe is particularly hard hit with infection statistics escalating unabatedly. It is clear that the pandemic is further depleting an already embargoed economy and the country's medical system is under particular pressure to cope with the added burden (Zimbabwe, 1999). The greatest area of distress is in Harare, the capital city, and the most densely populated region with the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe.

A number of HIV/AIDS intervention programmes have been implemented with varying success in African countries such as Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania (World Bank, 2000). The utilisation of information obtained from the vast cumulative experience forthcoming from intervention campaigns all over the world, but particularly in Africa, has however not been regarded as a major strategy to fight the disease. We, however, wish to argue that the creation of information systems and databanks that effectively capture, organise and disseminate HIV/AIDS-related information should be regarded as an essential intervention method and given a high priority in any country's agenda that is fighting the pandemic. A further factor that was considered by the researchers was that NGOs have proven to be prime movers and agents in HIV/AIDS mitigation intervention programmes in Africa, and also in Zimbabwe. They work at grassroots level in various care-giving capacities with the AIDS infected communities and this places them in an ideal situation to gather, organise and disseminate information on the topic. All the factors mentioned above thus motivated us to investigate whether NGOs in Zimbabwe have the capacity to leverage information and use this under-utilised but potentially 'powerful' weapon in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

2 CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The researchers argue that information disseminated by developmental organisations like NGOs may have more credibility and thus have a greater influence on the general population. We therefore decided to explore the possibility of more pro-actively involving the NGO sector in gathering, processing and disseminating information on HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. To achieve this we decided to: identify the main NGOs running HIV/AIDS mitigation programmes in Zimbabwe; explore whether these NGOs were in any way engaged in information creation, processing, management and dissemination work; identify ways to stimulate information sharing and networking among NGOs, the public, research institutions, government and donor agencies; identify the best methods, tools and skills that could be used to improve HIV/AIDS

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information management and dissemination, and specifically investigate the use of IT (Information Technology) for this purpose; and establish the relationship and alignment between the relevant national policies in Zimbabwe on information and HIV/AIDS on the one hand and on the other hand the NGOs' information, education and communication (IEC) functions and activities.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This specific field of research has never been undertaken in Zimbabwe and has generally not been undertaken in Africa. The nature of the project thus predicated that an exploratory research approach should be adopted. It was further also decided to follow a triangulated methodology incorporating both qualitative and quantitative components to obtain a richer picture as well as greater validity and reliability of the data collected (Neuman, 2000; Babbie & Mouton, 2001, Cresswell, 1994).

A survey was conducted among the sixty six NGOs that we identified as being engaged in HIV/AIDS mitigation programmes in Harare, the capital city with the highest population density, the most reported cases with HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. We collected both primary data during the empirical study and secondary, non-empirical data from various documentary sources provided by the NGOs on their operations, as well as the literature in the field. The primary data was collected during the one month cross-sectional survey by administering questionnaires to sixty-three NGOs, interviewing key informants, and observing operational procedures during personal visits to the NGOs. The questionnaires solicited information on all functions and services offered by this community and specifically tried to gauge the NGO's capacity to utilise information in the fight against AIDS. We decided to interview thirteen key informants (i.e. persons who are immersed in their community and who can accurately impart information about that community) based on information obtained from the Zimbabwe AIDS Network and the National AIDS Council (NAC). They were either fully qualified information professionals, or managers who were attached to the leading NGOs that seemed to play an active role in the dissemination of HIV/AIDS information. These informants provided valuable insights with regard to information management and ICT initiatives in the NGO sector, inter-organisation networking structures, resources and media used to disseminate information to the public, information policies, and the relationship among the NGOs and with government.

4 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

It was observed that the number of agencies dealing specifically with HIV/AIDS had increased dramatically since 1990. Funding in this sector, although originally fairly substantive, was found to be totally inadequate at the time of the study, and this severely affected the efficacy of their intervention programmes. The staffing capacity at the NGOs varied considerably and was generally determined by the nature of services and functions offered. Voluntary workers were a common feature and often the mainstay of the operation. It was clear that there was a general shortage of staff qualified in social work and particularly with experience in HIV/AIDS mitigation work. It was further fairly disturbing to observe that only a small number (19%) of the staff engaged in the management, processing and organisation of HIV/AIDS information were qualified information professionals. We are strongly of the opinion that the success of any programme that aims to leverage the power of information in the fight against AIDS will depend on the skills of the persons involved and that appropriate training in information management and related skills is required to ensure this. It was found that in a large number of the NGOs there was no defined demarcation among the communications, public relations, media liaison and information management duties and that often the same person executed all such tasks. It is deemed important that to ensure that quality service is provided that these roles are clearly defined and that only staff that are qualified and proficient in their work role be allocated the specific tasks.

4.1 Networking in the NGO Community

It was seen that a fair amount of both formal and informal networking was taking place within the NGO sector. This was mainly happening by means of periodic meetings and workshops. Four national AIDS bodies, namely the National AIDS Council (NAC), the Zimbabwe AIDS Network (ZAN), and ZNNP+ were steering many of these initiatives, while two Southern African regional organisations,

SANASO and SAfAIDS, both based in Harare, were the other significant coordinators of workshops and other network initiatives. It was very clear that these links were predominantly based on human-to-human or human-to-organisation contact and that very little use was made of information communication technologies (ICTs) such as online chat rooms (useful for brainstorming), e-mailing, etc, to facilitate and promote such networking. Although a considerable number of the NGOs had resource centres (75%), the information resources available were unfortunately limited. They were very limited in that few organisations had a formal acquisition policy or a specific budget dedicated to information resource purchases. It was however noted that organisations that were in some way involved with research, education and training seemed to have better and more sizeable collections which covered a fairly wide range from books, to reports, training manuals, etc. It was further observed that the organisation of the information resources was totally inadequate or non-existent. It was clear that many NGOs did not realise the value of the grassroots HIV/AIDS information they were in daily contact with and that much of it could constitute a major source of tacit scientific and social knowledge.

4.2 Availability of Information Technology and the Internet

The study indicated that 88% of the NGOs had computers, of which 25% had Internet connectivity. We would like to submit that access to and use of information technology can play an important role in the effective management of information. It increases efficiency and offers flexibility in the manipulation, dissemination and use of data and information. A variety of database management programmes can be applied for this purpose and these can range from the more sophisticated (and usually expensive) to more basic and often open source systems.

It is further suggested that access to the Internet is of vital importance to information dissemination. Chivhanga (2000) points out that the last few years have seen a phenomenal growth of Internet connectivity in Africa. It has led to a transformation in the lives of large numbers of the people and is fast changing the way organisations do business. In Zimbabwe, there is increasing growth of Internet services. It is thus clear that the Internet would provide an ideal platform for NGOs to disseminate the extensive HIV/AIDS-related information and the variety of community issues and other topics they engage with. It would further enhance communication with community members (within the NGOs and their external partners), government decision makers, researchers and the general public. We would further like to suggest that NGOs should also embrace the idea of developing interactive websites for the benefit of everyone interested in the subject of HIV/AIDS. The cost of such a service may be high, but NGOs can collaborate and develop a single national HIV/AIDS gateway or portal. This would create an added advantage in that it would enable individual NGOs to participate and reduce the costs of website authoring, subscriptions to website hosting agencies, and leasing of telecommunication peripherals, etc. Organisations can even use such a portal to distribute annual reports, research papers, etc. as the audio-visual features of websites make them an ideal medium that can be used to communicate, educate and inform targeted users.

There are clearly several benefits that derive from the utilisation of computers and the Internet and which could effectively be applied by the NGOs, from small-scale operations to large cooperative initiatives such as the development of an integrated shared Internet portal and a national Internet-based bibliographic database.

4.3 Media production and Information Dissemination

It is argued that information dissemination should be a crucial aspect of the work of NGOs engaged in HIV/AIDS programmes. They are the custodians of a large body of tacit knowledge on HIV/AIDS, they link many experts in the field, and they have access to and the trust of the affected communities. The study however indicated that although the NGOs made a commendable effort to use a wide variety of media and resources (ranging from mass media such as radio, television, newspapers and poster campaigns to the production and dissemination of more specialised information resources) to reach-out to their communities this was not always successful. It was found that the production of information sources at organisational level was still fairly limited and mostly related to producing materials such as pamphlets, posters and newsletters. In addition reports and to a far lesser extent research papers, books and audio-visual materials (e.g. videos) were created and used to disseminate HIV/AIDS-related information. Posters were seen to be a particularly effective medium to use to disseminate information during mass-campaigns and to display in public places.

We further take the view that the NGO sector would be able to substantively increase their

production of information if they had access to more effective information management services and if their staff were more skilled in using the technologies and tools (e.g. scanners, digital cameras, the Internet, computers etc.) that many of them already have access to. They would then be in a better position to harness and articulate the unique knowledge they collectively possess and be able to more effectively package it into explicit information that can be accessed by the general public, students, researchers, and other specialised users. With regard to mass media it was observed that although television and more frequently the radio were used by many NGOs to broadcast information, there were a number of limitations attached to the use of these media: the cost to broadcast is beyond the means of many NGOs; there are only four radio stations and one television outlet in the country; all are owned by the state and scheduling of programmes on both television and radio is thus strictly regulated; and as already mentioned state owned media have limited credibility among the people. Newspaper articles are another vehicle that have the potential to be a major resource and provide a useful method to externalise information to a wide audience.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings we would like to put forward a number of suggestions that we hope could usefully be employed by the NGO community and other players in Zimbabwe to improve the creation, organisation and dissemination of information and thereby assist them to render more effective HIV/AIDS mitigation programmes. It is our view that quality information services be introduced in this sector. An important prerequisite to the provision of such services would be to motivate for the need to introduce such services and to persuade government and organisations involved in HIV/AIDS programmes to incorporate an information and knowledge management strategy in the national HIV/AIDS policy. A further prerequisite is that a knowledge management policy should be adopted by the NGOs working in the HIV/AIDS sector and to ensure effective information interventions such an information and knowledge management policy should be aligned to the national information policy as represented in the National Library and Documentation Services Act (1985) of Zimbabwe. All legislation and policies that is related to HIV/AIDS NGO work and information service provision may thus also need to be examined and reviewed with the view to incorporate a relevant policy framework that would facilitate the provision of HIV/AIDS information service initiatives across Zimbabwe. There are other two relevant statutes, viz, the Post and Telecommunications Act, 2000 which regulates ICT development, and the proposed NGO Bill which intends to provide policy guidelines for NGOs in Zimbabwe. The realisation of an effective information and knowledge management strategy for the HIV/AIDS mitigation sector further also requires financial and organisational support. It is therefore recommended that NGOs should pool their resources in order to operate more cost effectively and thereby make it feasible to utilise sophisticated IT platforms and applications that would enhance information and knowledge management practices.

5.1 Recruitment of Qualified Information Specialists

The management of knowledge and information constitutes a complex web of entities, processes and procedures. To implement such strategies requires skill and knowledge of the various tools and procedures that can be utilised. It is argued that without the assistance of qualified information professionals with the requisite skills, the implementation of such strategies would be ineffective. It is argued that only professional information workers have the expertise to effectively harness and disseminate the tacit knowledge and explicit information that could serve as the catalyst to identify problems and provide solutions relating to HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. Information professionals should be deployed in the NGOs so that they can become information and knowledge hub managers who focus on capturing, storing and disseminating organisational information and facilitating networking within and outside the organisation.

5.2 Expanded use of Information and Communication Technologies

The effective use of ICTs can play an important role in facilitating the dissemination of information and knowledge to a large body of users. Given the high proportion of NGOs that had computers and the acceptable level of access to the Internet in urban regions of Zimbabwe (it is also here that the highest number of HIV/AIDS infected are found), it follows that the NGOs should embrace ICT applications to harness and disseminate HIV/AIDS information. It is recommended that a national, centralised electronic

database of all HIV/AIDS information in Zimbabwe be established. Users would find information more easily and information could be disseminated and networked more effectively as the subject content of all the information resources found at the NGOs would be captured and stored uniformly. The NGOs should further develop and maintain organisational websites, as these are good tools for information dissemination and communication purposes as well as for marketing and fundraising drives. It would further be beneficial to extend this into a national web portal, wherein all HIV/AIDS information, education and communication issues in the country would be gathered together. This would enable researchers, the public and partnerships (donors, financial and technical partners) to access all information related to HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. The web portal could further host the national HIV/AIDS database and provide the IT platform to facilitate the development of knowledge management related functions or services, such as communities-of-practice, online bulletin boards, etc. We are further of the opinion that a standardised HIV/AIDS thesaurus and classification should be used in the database and by all the NGO resource centres for content management. This would help considerably with the indexing and classification of information and standardise and enhance the quality of database capturing and searching. A bibliographic services centre would need to be established to coordinate technical services and ensure the smooth running of the HIV/AIDS information services.

6 FINAL CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main premise of this paper has been that one of the most effective, practical and realistic interventions that could be introduced to prevent and considerably abate the spread of HIV/AIDS is to ensure that all relevant HIV/AIDS-related information is captured, organised, recorded and then effectively disseminated for use by all interested and affected parties. Such information would incorporate all categories of information and knowledge and would range from tacit indigenous knowledge to scientifically, verified and recorded information. It is not disputed that information about HIV/AIDS is currently being disseminated in Zimbabwe but we contend that the approaches that have generally been used to gather and disseminate information are not sufficiently systematic and effective. It is our view that a professional approach should be adopted to spearhead the amalgamation of HIV/AIDS information sources that then could be used as an important weapon in the fight against the epidemic in Zimbabwe. Finally, we wish to collude with the view that the most efficient way for the NGOs to engage with information is to implement effective and pro-active information and knowledge management strategies and programmes. By adopting such strategies, the NGOs would achieve better results in their fight against AIDS, its impact would be reduced and the infected, affected and those that seek to find medical, social and economic solutions would all benefit. The existence of a strong and committed group of organisations whose objectives are to fight HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe using various methods, including dissemination of information, offers a firm foundation for this possibility.

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