

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT: ROLES OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES IN PRESERVING AND PROVIDING ACCESS TO INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE (IK) IN NAMIBIA: CASE STUDY OF “PRESERVE NAMIBIA INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE” PROJECT

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ABSTRACT: Namibia has rich indigenous knowledge systems; however, such information is not properly documented and as a result it is not accessible to wider audiences especially researchers and users of public libraries and archives in general. There are various individuals and institutions in Namibia researching on indigenous knowledge, however the resulting research papers and reports are stored in the individual institutional repositories, thereby making it difficult for public members to have access to such information. In addressing the gap of inaccessibility of indigenous information, the Directorate of Namibia Library and Archives Service embarked on a project entitled, “Preserve Namibia’s Indigenous Knowledge”. This project was funded by the National Commission on Research, Science and Technology (NCRST) with the aim to contribute and enrich the documentation and preservation of indigenous knowledge in Namibia. The project was also aimed at introducing advanced systems to improve and enable easy access to indigenous information. This paper highlights the results of the Preserve Namibia’s Indigenous Knowledge project and the importance and roles of public libraries and archives in documenting, managing, preserving, and facilitating access to indigenous information. It also presents practical examples on how public libraries and archives can initiate programmes and involve indigenous communities in the development of libraries services and documentation of indigenous information as well as introducing systems to enhance access to indigenous information.

KEYWORDS: indigenous knowledge, Namibia, indigenous information.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge a body of knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society, and forms the basis for decision making in areas such as agriculture, health care, food preparation, education and natural resources Warren (1991, 1).

Indigenous knowledge plays a vital role in agriculture, animal and human health, natural resources management, education and other activities in Namibia. Most community members especially in rural areas are still using traditional methods of farming, processing food, animal rearing and medicinal needs. Such knowledge as articulated by various researchers is strengthening Namibia’ potential to compete with other countries in supplying natural products and creating sustainable economic opportunities for rural communities.

It is documented that most of the indigenous information in Africa, including Namibia, is not sufficiently documented, and it is mostly learnt and shared through word of mouth and observation. It is also noted that the knowledge harnessed by indigenous people in Namibia is not accorded the same importance as scientific knowledge. The unavailability of documented indigenous information has made it difficult for researchers and wider users of libraries and archives to research and enhance this knowledge and make it accessible to wider audiences. There is a great concern that the indigenous knowledge of many countries in Africa might get extinct if sustainable programmes to document and preserve knowledge are not put in place.

Considering the unavailability of documented indigenous knowledge in Namibia, the Directorate of Namibia Library and Archives Service (NLAS) observed a gap between scientific and indigenous knowledge in all the public libraries countrywide. To help address this gap, NLAS, through the assistance of the National Commission on Research, Science and Technology (NCRST), embarked on a project titled "Preserve Namibia's Indigenous Knowledge" during the year 2015.

The aim of project was improve the documentation and preservation of indigenous knowledge in Namibia. The goal of the project was to contribute to the preservation of indigenous knowledge by recording documentaries of indigenous activities as well as to introduce advanced systems to improve and enable easy access to indigenous information. The project envisioned in the long run, to assist communities to learn and embrace their cultural heritage, use cultural methods that are familiar to the indigenous people, and to introduce innovative projects that will enhance productivity, and aid in generating income.

NAMIBIA LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES SERVICE NETWORK

The Directorate of Namibia Library and Archives Service oversees and centrally procure resources for all 65 public libraries countrywide. Its mandate among others is to collect and disseminate information through access to books, e-resources and other educational materials, provide free internet and basic computer training as well as promote awareness of and preservation of cultural heritage. The Directorate's performance outcome has been positive in terms of procuring and proving access to global information, however, the area on the preservation of cultural heritage and promoting access to indigenous information has been neglected and this motivated the Directorate to initiate the Preserve Namibia's Indigenous Knowledge project.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

Preserve Namibia's Indigenous Knowledge was funded by the National Commission of Research Science and Technology for a period of two years, from 2014/2015 and 2015/2016. The project plan was to identify, with the assistance of community members, critical activities that might be at risk of extinction, or those that are critical to the community members and needed to be recorded, documented and preserved for future generations. The project used the action research method to collect data. The first step of the initial stage of the project focused on planning and the project team drew up a project plan and schedules, and identified the sites to be piloted for phase one and phase two of the project. The second step involved identifying and working with community leaders to identify activities to be recorded and documented. The project team members held meetings with Traditional Authorities where the processes of the project were discussed and agreed upon. The Traditional Authorities and community leaders assisted the project team with the identification of skilled and knowledgeable community members to assist with the provision of actual information to be recorded. The third step was involved hiring a technical team comprising of professional photographers and sound technicians to assist with the production of the documentaries and capturing of still pictures. The project team also identified a project review team that to review all the processes and ensure that activities were being carried out as planned. The review team was also tasked to review the actual products or documentaries before they were finalised.

The second stage focused on preparing for the fieldwork. In the first step during this stage the Ministry of the Education, Arts and Culture wrote intent letters to the Traditional Authorities to obtain authorisation to implement the project activities in their areas. After the approval was granted by the Traditional Authorities, the project team prepared for the fieldwork. As the project plan was to document various activities step by step, with the idea that the final products would assist the public members and equip them with the skills and ability to perform those activities by themselves, the technical team together with the participants prepared the scripts well in advance which ensured that all steps are documented and clearly explained.

RESULTS

The output of the project was the production of documentaries and this was done in collaboration with the community leaders, elders, experts and community project coordinators. The identification of the activities to be documented was done with the assistance of the community members, who determined the importance of the activities and the value they have to the community members. In addition, the technical team was tasked to produce high quality documentaries to be used for TV broadcasting and DVDs distribution. The accompanying publications were also to be published, and easy reference systems like websites, and a Facebook page have been created. The information produced through this project is made accessible at libraries and archives for researchers, scholars, tourists and the general public, and it is to be preserved for future generations.

Through this project, 21 high quality documentaries have been produced from five regions, namely, Oshikoto, Oshana, Omusati, Ohangwena and Hardap. Sixteen (16) documentaries on Ovawambo indigenous food, drinks, and the making of traditional utensil were produced, as well as five (5) documentaries on Nama culture, namely the importance of fire, the use of animal skins, traditional medicine, perfume from the plants as well as powder from stones were recorded.

The study found that there are still opportunities to capture and document valuable indigenous information as knowledgeable community members are willing to share their skills. Nevertheless, the project is labour intensive, costly and it requires skilled and experienced personnel to record information with lasting value. The cost and intensity of the project has been observed as a serious challenge to the entire process of documenting and preserving indigenous knowledge in Namibia.

The findings also show that there is an urgent need to continue documenting indigenous knowledge and create innovative systems to enhance access to indigenous information as there is a threat of extinction. Libraries and archives also need to aggressively address the issue of the promotion of access to indigenous knowledge as most of the community members have developed an interest to learn about their culture and heritage, however, platforms for the community members to showcase and learn about their cultures need to be created.

EXPECTED NATIONAL BENEFITS

This project is expected to empower and increase the level of self-efficacy and self-determination of local communities as well as to increase cultural pride and motivate local communities to solve local problems using local skills and increase local participation in the national development processes. Given the availability of resources, this project is anticipated to cover all the 14 regions in the country and thus ensure comprehensive documenting of Namibia's indigenous knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The immediate recommendations from this project is for the institutions with interests in the preservation of indigenous knowledge to further recognise the importance and value of safeguarding crucial knowledge from the communities and make it accessible to wider audiences.

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