

Empowering National Development Goals: The future of Ministerial Libraries in Namibia

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Abstract:

This paper is discussing radical changes hampering the provision of information in Ministerial libraries in Namibia. Changes that are challenging Ministerial Libraries to redefine their roles to remain relevant to their parent organizations. The paper is based on a study which investigated the future of Ministerial Libraries, focusing on the roles they are playing, the services rendered to the users, the skills and experiences required by information professionals and the overall support Ministerial Libraries get from the senior managers within the Ministries. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected using open ended questionnaires administered to library users and information professionals in the Ministries and unstructured interviews were conducted with the Head of Ministerial Libraries. The study revealed that there is still a need for libraries in the Ministries, however challenges such as changes in technology, availability of information from numerous sources, insufficient budget for libraries, lack of local expertise, uncompetitive compensation of information professionals and unclearly define roles of libraries within Ministries are hindering the effectiveness of their services.

The paper includes number of recommendations to improve services of the Ministerial Libraries in Namibia.

Keywords: Namibia libraries, Ministerial Libraries, Workplace Libraries, Namibia National Development goals, Government Libraries.

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF LIBRARIES IN THE MINISTRIES IN NAMIBIA

Most Government Ministries in Namibia have institutional libraries known as Ministerial Libraries. These libraries are under the Ministerial Libraries Service, a sub-division under the Directorate of Namibia Library and Archives Service in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. The Sub-division is responsible for providing Human Resources to the Ministerial Libraries and ensuring that libraries in the Ministries are fully functioning. This is in accordance with the Namibia Library and Information Service Act, 2000 (Act 4 of 2000) and the Policy Framework for Libraries and Allied information Agencies for Namibia (1997).

There are currently 17 Ministerial Libraries operating under the Ministerial Library Service each focusing on the subject field(s) of the host Ministry. These libraries are mandated to provide technical and scientific information to decision-makers, researchers, students, business community, technicians and other professionals on key areas of the national economy.

2 ROLES OF LIBRARIES IN THE MINISTRIES IN NAMIBIA

The key functions of the Ministerial Libraries are to provide technical and scientific information to decision makers, support research in the Ministries, disseminate scientific information such as legal information to Judges, Health information to Health professional, business information to business community and other professionals on the key areas of the national economy and industrial development.

The importance of Ministerial Libraries, and indeed all libraries in Namibia, is underscored in *Vision 2030*, the official document in which the country's long-term vision for national development is articulated. In that landmark document, it is envisioned that the nation shall strive to transform itself "into an innovative, knowledge-based society" (*Vision 2030*, 2004 p.41). In this regard, Ministerial libraries are challenged to expand their services and facilitate access to global information as well as to integrate information technology infrastructure to manage and maintain both print and digital information. Namibia's Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) Policy (nd) also recognizes the pivotal role that libraries in Namibia can play in support of education, knowledge management, ICT education and citizen's life-long learning.

3 CHALLENGES HAMPERING THE PROVISION OF INFORMATION IN MINISTERIAL LIBRARIES

Most Ministries in Namibia are not equipped with sufficient resources (such as finance and information professionals) to independently provide quality information to their organisations. As such, Ministerial Libraries have been identified as key providers of national and global information to the Ministries and individuals who require their services.

Though these Libraries are identified as key information providers in host Ministries, they are challenged by a severe shortage of specialised and experienced personnel. *The Library and Information Sector (LIS) Strategic Assessment Study (2011)* and *The Economic Analysis of Library and Information Services in Namibia*, (2010) indicated that the majority of librarians in the Ministries are new graduates and that some libraries are run by unqualified personnel. These studies also indicated that the operation of the Ministerial Libraries are adversely affected by constraints such as low budget (or, indeed, no budget) uncompetitive

remuneration resulting in the Ministerial Libraries Service unable to attract or retain experienced personnel, lack of experience personnel in the country and no clearly-spelt out roles for libraries within Ministries.

The ever changing electronic environment is also one of the challenge, to the extent that a question whether there is still a need to have Libraries in the Ministries is becoming prominent. This bring us to the issue raised by Sandler M. (2005) by asking what a workplace library or another library, as a service provider, has to offer to the users which they cannot find for themselves. In the light of the foregoing realities, Ministerial Libraries in Namibia are forced to demonstrate that they don't just provide quality information but also that they add value to the performance of the Ministries.

Though it becomes imperative for Ministerial libraries to redefine their roles and that librarians are conscious of the fact that their users expect better and quality service, taking up new services is a serious challenge for Namibia due to the severe shortage of librarians with relevant experience and skills.

4 PROFESSIONALS SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE REQUIRED FOR MINISTERIAL LIBRARIES IN NAMIBIA

Most Ministerial Libraries in Namibia are small in sizes and managed by one librarian. The librarians are expected to possess a wide range of skills in order to perform all tasks required and deliver information needed on time. While it is difficult for one person to be a specialist in different areas, it has been suggested that all librarians should possess the basic skills required to determine users' information needs, manage users and encouraging people to share knowledge (Gerolimos M. and Konsta R., 2008).

Since there is a high demand to integrate Information Technology in library services, workplace librarians are expected to possess the skill to create library websites and web accessible documents that will assist users to easily navigate to other relevant sites. Linking of resources is an important service today as it enables users to easily identify related information sources. If Ministerial Libraries in Namibia adapt those services they will enhance their services and will enable their users to have instant access to valuable information.

Singh S.P and Kumar K. (2005) and Baruchson A.S and Bronstein J., (2002) emphasised that as libraries are moving from physical to digital collections, librarians have to be able to acquire, organise and manage access of digital documents. They should be able to effectively deal with information in various formats such as audio, video, scanned pictures and use the technique of information architect to ensure that users can easily navigate from one item to another. That ability will help information professionals to deliver information beyond user's expectation.

Still emphasising the point of overwhelming availability of information, it is essential for workplace librarians to have the ability to critically analyse and filter information for their users (Brophy P. 2001). They are expected to create resource guides to enable users to have easy access to various arrays of related quality information sources.

In regard to information retrieval, librarians in Ministries should effectively execute searches and find relevant information on time and be able to transfer such skills to their users by

educating them on information related activities such as information literacy, user education and information skills training which will help users to be self-sufficient and enable them to effectively carry their own researches (Taylor K., 2006; Scammell A., 1997; and Ferguson S., (2007).

Baruchson A.S and Bronstein J. (2002) tackling government libraries specifically, revealed that reference and research skills, organising skill, web page design, customer service skill, interpersonal skills and information communication skills are the top priorities required in government workplace libraries.

5 INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The relationship between workplace libraries and their institutions has received little attention from researchers, in particularly with managers whose support can influence the operation of the entire library operations.

The relationships between host Ministries and their libraries is briefly discussed in a study conducted by the Namibia Library and Information Council (2007) and quoted in Namibian Library and Information Service Sector Strategic Assessment Study Baseline Study (2008). The study indicated that there seem to be little or no connection between some Ministerial libraries and the operation of host ministries. Libraries cannot operate effectively without their users' input and senior managers' support. The performance and quality of the library services depend heavily on the support of the institutions they are serving.

The advantage of libraries working together with senior managers in institutions is discussed in the *ICMA Management Perspective* report (2007) stated that managers who understand the value of libraries within their institutions give valuable advice, discuss and review library's goals and align those goals to the mission of institutions. Consequently, they ensure that relevant information that will help the organisation to excel is readily available.

It may be assumed that libraries that are operating in isolation, as stated above, are the ones faced with challenges such as insufficient budget and possible closure. Librarians in such institutions may not be given a chance to make their input in the budgeting process or to have a representative of the Library in crucial discussions related to the operation of the institution's library.

To avoid such an unpleasant outcome, librarians working in Ministries need to ensure that they are actively aiming to meet the information needs of employees. In that way, managers can be made aware of the traditional, evolving, and the potential role of the library within the institutions.

Ferguson S. (2005) notes the importance of involving senior managers in the activities of libraries explained that senior managers are well-placed to champion or defend the position of the library within an institution. Managers have to make sure that their libraries have an adequate budget to improve the quality of service delivery. If managers understand the role of libraries in facilitating easy access to reliable and relevant information then they can defend their activities with a little persuasion from information professionals. Taylor K. and Corral S. (2007) recommends that library professionals have to be proactive in raising their profiles. They have to "improve rapport with colleagues, establish points of contact and keep the library in people's minds and encouraging more effective usage" ..

This paper recognizes the paucity of literature on the relationship between libraries and their institutions especially in the environment where libraries are perceived as hardly important. There are few researchers whose studies touched on the aspect of institutions' support for their libraries and the impact it has in the operations of the libraries. It was therefore imperative for this paper to present the findings obtained from the views of information professionals in Namibia's Ministerial libraries on the level of support they receive from their host Ministries and the impact it has on the performance of the Ministerial Libraries.

6 PRESENTATION OF DATA

Populations

Thirteen (13) Ministerial Libraries were identified from the Ministerial Libraries Service (MLS) of Namibia. Thirteen (13) librarians formed the group of library professionals, while one hundred (100) users were conducted to ensure a wide representation of all institutions.

Sample & Sampling procedures

A random sampling procedure was used where each member of the population had the same chance of being included in the sample. Users of the thirteen (13) Ministerial Libraries were requested to respond to the online survey and all those who responded, regardless of the Division to which they belong, automatically formed the sample of the study.

Data collection procedures

Data was collected using open-ended questionnaires, and unstructured interviews. Librarian questionnaires were sent directly to Ministerial Librarians while users were requested to complete an online survey powered by SurveyGizmo 3.0 software. A word document questionnaire was also attached as a supplement for users who were unable to link to the online survey. The survey questionnaire was pre-tested by three librarians and three library users. Interviews with the Head of Libraries was conducted telephonically (to facilitate further questioning) and recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

The data of this study was analysed according to the components presented in the instruments used to collect data (questionnaires and interviews) and the results are presented from the two perspectives; of library users and library professionals respectively.

7 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

7.1 Library users and library usage

The main users of Libraries in the Ministries was found to be specialists in different areas ranging from Hydrologist, Geologists, Development Planners, Economists, Aquatic ecologists', Statistician etc.

To determine the use of library services, library users were asked to state the frequency of use of the library services as well as the methods used to access such services and the responses were as follows.

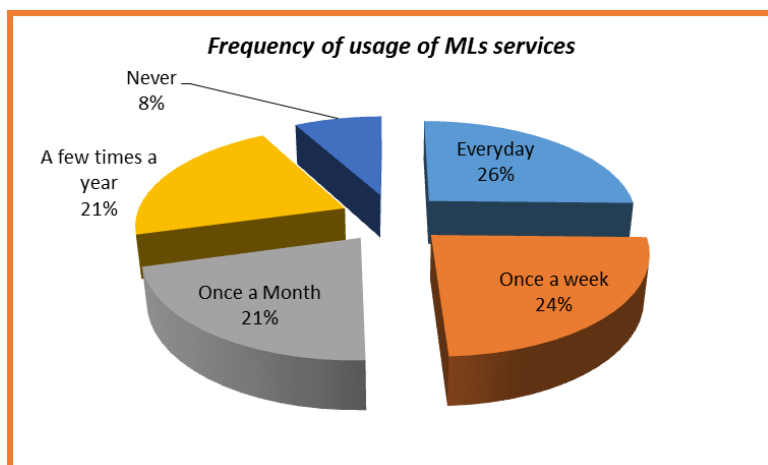


Figure 1: Frequency of usage of Ministerial Libraries services

In response to the question regarding the methods used to conduct information enquiries from the library, 45 (56%) respondents out of the 64 (80%) stated that they access library services in person, 15 (19%) use telephone while four (5%) use online services.

The study took into account that libraries are currently not the only information providers available to the users. As a result, it sought to determine other information services utilised by public servants who do not use their in-house libraries to obtain work-related information.

Out of the total number of 80 Library users who replied to the questionnaire only 10 respondents answered to this question. Five (50%) respondents indicated that they used institutions' websites; three (30%) use search engines such as Google while two (20%) obtained information from colleagues.

7.2 Roles of Ministerial/ workplace Libraries

Library professionals were asked to rate and state other roles that are perceived as relevant for Ministerial Libraries in the 21st century. The results of eight (80%) respondents, who answered the question, are as follows with some roles rated of equal importance.

Rank	Roles
1	Preserve the memory of the institution
1	Provide service and information support to employees
2	Manage organisational knowledge
3	Facilitate communication and access to government policies and public documents
4	Increase awareness of government information and services to external and internal users

Figure 2: Roles of Ministerial Libraries

The Head of Ministerial Libraries noted that; Ministerial Libraries in Namibia are playing the role of National Information Centres, providing information in their area of specialisation not only to the institutions in which they are based but to the general public.

The contribution of Ministerial Libraries in the performance of their host Ministries was measured by asking users whether the work of the host Ministries would be affected in any way if they had no libraries. Respondents (95%) indicated that the work of the Ministries would be affected to a certain degree without quantifying the extent to which the absence of libraries would have an effect.

7.3 Information services

In respect of information services provided by Ministerial libraries, library professionals were asked to state the emphasis of their libraries’ collections, while the library users were asked to state the most important services currently being provided by their libraries. The responses of ten (100%) library professionals are summarised as follows:

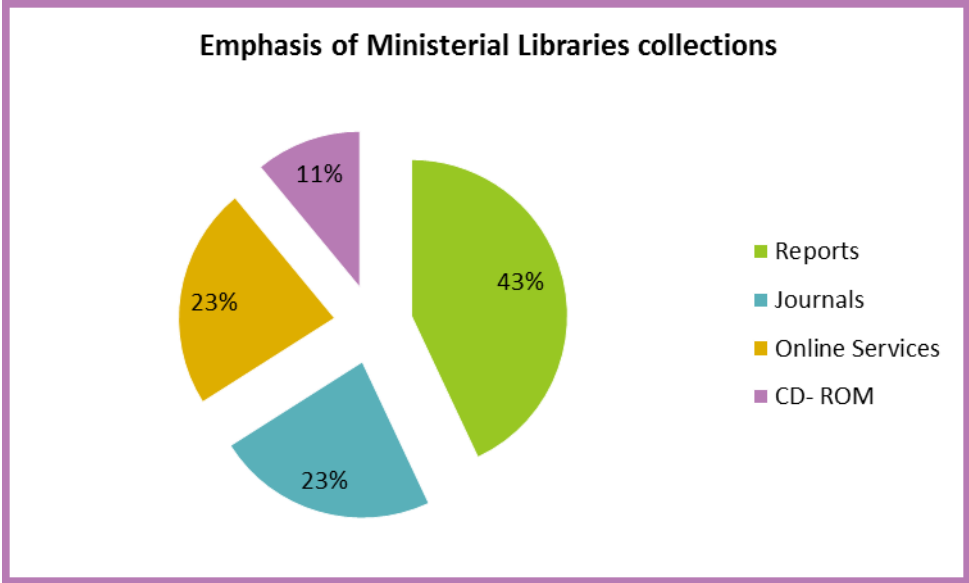


Figure 3: Emphasis of Ministerial Libraries collections

In addition, 73 (91%) library users who responded to this question identified the following services as the most important services currently provided by their libraries.

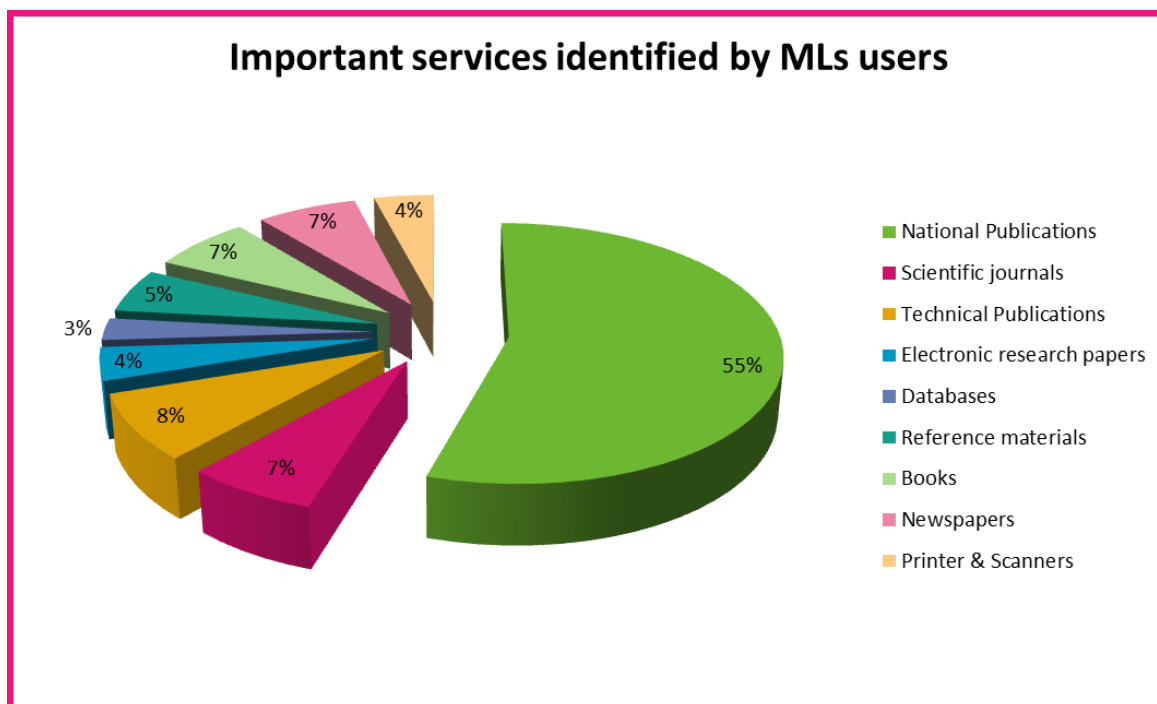


Figure 4: Important services identified by Ministerial Libraries users

Based on the fact that library users' preferences are always changing with time, libraries are continuously introducing new services and initiatives to meet the user's needs. As a result, professionals and library users indicated services that are perceived to be relevant but currently not available at the library. Ten (100%) information professionals stated that, there is an urgent need for a computerised catalogue for the users to search for what is available in the libraries from their offices. They also indicate that they need internet terminals for external users who sometimes need to search for information from the internet.

One respondent stated that library user education and information literacy is currently not provided in Ministerial Libraries and suggested that there is a need for librarians to work together with Human Resource departments to include library user education programmes in the staff induction programmes.

Both users and library professionals indicated that Ministerial Libraries are highly stocked with printed materials but are underdeveloped in terms of electronic services, such as online delivery and the use of databases. The lack of balance between print and electronic resources seems to be a factor that contributes to the low usage of the services of Ministerial Libraries. It also hinders the ability of the wider community to have access to work-related information or government information in general when such information is needed.

7.4 Future of Ministerial Libraries in Namibia

It was important to determine whether Libraries in Ministries would still be needed in five to ten years from now, considering that most users are able to get good information from other information providers without having to visit the libraries. Respondents acknowledged the importance of other information providers such as the internet, however, they indicated that libraries will be needed even more to ensure that users are provided with information tailored

to meet the individual's needs. The respondents also suggested that Libraries in Ministries have a role to play in facilitating access to government information for the general public and making global information accessible to the public servants for informed decisions.

7.5 Status of resource sharing between Ministerial Libraries

To measure the extent to which Ministerial Libraries participate in resource sharing arrangements, the study asked both users and information professionals whether the nature of their work requires them to make use of materials sourced from other libraries. 90% of the respondents answered in the affirmative.

As to the methods used to obtain the information from other libraries, information professionals indicated that they use the traditional inter-library loan. Only one respondent indicated that they use other software and participate in resource sharing-associations. The use of traditional inter-library loan is an indication that Ministerial Libraries users are unable to make their own reservation or request for information from other Ministerial Libraries without going through their own libraries. The process, as described by librarians is time consuming.

The majority of users indicated that they obtain the information they need from their colleagues in other Ministries. The reason they resort to this method may be to avoid the process of the traditional inter-library loan or that the information available within Ministries is not stored in one central point where all employees, including the librarians, have access to it. The absence of a central point in which information is stored can create a situation in which some of information can be provided only by individuals who have access to it. Though a few respondents indicated that they obtain information from institutions' websites and libraries, they all rated the methods as ineffective in terms of timely delivery.

As to how the system can be improved, information professionals indicated that there is a need for a Ministerial Libraries' website to serve as a central point for access to information from all Ministries. They further indicate that there is a need for a union online catalogue which will enable users to browse through the collections of other libraries. The formation of consortia, and collaboration beyond the traditional method of sharing were highly recommended.

7.6 Skills and experience required for Librarians in Ministries

In order to provide good quality service, information professionals require adequate skills and experience. Good communication skills has been identified as necessary to enable the information professional to implement important initiatives such as information literacy skills training and library instruction programme. Since information technology now drives many aspects of the work of librarians, the need for Ministerial librarians to be conversant with information technology was emphasized. In addition to the core skills of librarianship, respondents indicated that Ministerial librarians need to be familiar with the terminologies used in the work of the host Ministries and to be knowledgeable with the functions and developments in their host Ministries.

7.7 Involvement of senior managers on library initiatives

The availability and extent of support of library activities by the managers was measured by asking information professionals to rate the support they receive from the managers. The findings indicated the willingness of managers to be involved in libraries activities. It was stated that managers are always involved in recommending the range of services provided in the libraries. The majority of librarians however indicated that managers are "somehow

supportive”, and one can assumed that they still need to be convinced of the value and impact of libraries on the performance of institutions in order to fully support libraries’ initiatives.

Information professionals recognized the role that managers play in the provision of information within Ministries by stating that without the involvement of managers or the willingness of managers to participate in the library's activities, the institution is as good as without a library. They further highlighted that managers are the ones with the power to appropriate, or lobby for the appropriation of resources for libraries.

The participation of library users in library activities was also assessed by asking users whether they attend library programmes. 80% of responses received mentioned that they have never been invited to attended library programmes, however indicated a willingness to participate if such programmes are organised.

To measure the contribution of Ministerial Libraries to the performance of the institutions, the findings indicated that only 36% of respondents agreed that Ministerial Libraries are contributing to the performance of institutions, 41% indicated that they are “somehow contributing” while 23% saw no major contribution by the library. The number of users who do not see the contribution of libraries is greater than expected, and it indicates that these libraries need to revamp their services and focus more on services that contribute to the performance of their users.

8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Along with conclusions, recommendations are made on measures that will help to enhance the contributions of the Ministerial Libraries to the work of their host Ministries.

Ministerial Libraries need to respond and align their services to the long-term national development plan (Namibia Vision 2030).

The roles and mission of Ministerial Libraries need to be clarified or re-defined to fit the roles of National Information Centres. These must be structured carefully to articulate the missions of Ministerial Libraries and ensure that their services will not end up as a mere extension of public libraries.

Ministerial libraries should be clearly understood to be specialized libraries; this will shape the plans for the development of facilities, the training of staff, and acquisitions of materials. The resources to be acquired should be those that are relevant to the work of the host Ministries.

There is a need to adapt new technologies to meet the information needs of their users and this will create various non-traditional methods of networking and resource-sharing among libraries. Experienced and adequate personnel need to be hired, staffs need to be properly-trained and motivated. An attractive remuneration is required to attract more professionals and to ensure that the Ministerial Library Service can attract and retain the right sort of personnel.

Staff members who are currently in the service need to attend additional trainings to enhance their capacity in fields of specialization. The Government need to sponsor high school learners to study librarianships at tertiary level. The Ministerial Library Service need to draw up and implement a budgetary structure for all Ministerial Libraries to enable Ministerial

Libraries to form a consortia to share resources and cut subscription cost for individual libraries.

As National Information Centres, there is a bright future for enhanced Ministerial Libraries to be the engine that empowers Ministries to achieve Namibia's National Development Goals.

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