

88767

011.007

**DOCUMENTATION FOR DEVELOPMENT:  
A VIEW FROM THE NORTH**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

Presented at the

**EADI WORKING GROUP ON INFORMATION  
AND DOCUMENTATION SEMINAR**

on

**STRENGTHENING COOPERATION IN DOCUMENTATION  
FOR DEVELOPMENT**

**PARIS, FRANCE, 3-6 SEPTEMBER 1991**

by

**MARTHA B. STONE**

**DIRECTOR**

**INFORMATION SCIENCES DIVISION  
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE  
P.O. BOX 8500, K1G 3H9  
OTTAWA, CANADA**



*APR 11 V  
STONE  
NO. 15*

## DOCUMENTATION FOR DEVELOPMENT: A VIEW FROM THE NORTH

Some months ago, when I was advised of the subject of my address today, I had mixed feelings about the way in which I should approach such an important and complex topic. I looked forward to the prospect of sharing with you some of my views about the role and the impact of documentation on the process of development, for it is a subject to which I have given a great deal of thought. At the same time, I was somewhat concerned about my ability to speak to this issue from the perspective of the North. Underlining this concern is my belief that development or socio-economic progress has been made more difficult because the northern perspective has influenced unduly the decisions and agendas for development.

To appease my concern, I have elected to change the title somewhat, from "a view from the North" to the "perspective from a development assistance organization", which happens to be situated in the north. I believe that this perspective or view may indeed be more appropriate, for the organization in question is the International Development Research Centre, which for more than twenty years has actively supported and facilitated the creation of documentation and information activities. I have been fortunate enough to have been associated with many of these activities, and I believe that I can comment upon some essential factors related to the subject of documentation and development.

If I now turn my attention to the first part of the title of my address, I believe that a few words are required to situate the concept of "documentation for development". During the past two decades, the term "development" has evolved from the concept of socio-economic progress to that of empowerment. For development to be realized, people must be empowered to access the systems within a society and be empowered to make personal choices about their own destiny. This means that those who wish

to be in a position to have input into the global agenda setting on socio-economic or geo-political issues, must be so empowered. This for me is the essence of the development process.

Does the field of documentation have any importance, or role to play in this process? The answer is clearly, yes. In the final days of negotiating with IDRC a very important project concerned with strengthening the capacity of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria to support a regional centre in information science, the Vice-Chancellor stated that during the past few years, he has come to change his firmly held position that "information is important to the development process" to that of "any level of development is impossible without information and equity of access to that information".

I would also like to focus some attention on the concept of documentation. For the purpose of this presentation, I am considering documentation in its broadest sense. I shall not limit my comments to the art or science of information analysis, rather, my definition will include those processes required to acquire, manipulate, organize, repackage, and disseminate information to a pre-defined target audience. Included in these processes are the mechanisms required to determine and evaluate if the information needs of the targeted group have been met by the systems established. This definition is not only broad, but it is also multi-faceted, for it is not possible to consider these processes without considering the physical, human, and financial resources required for system and service implementation.

For the information practitioner in the field of socio-economic development, the strong linkages between documentation and development have always been known. The literature itself,

as we know, attests to this. What has changed recently is that these linkages are now recognized by those who are responsible for the formulation and execution of policies which determine the level of development or the degree of empowerment. I refer again to the most important revelation by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan.

I mentioned earlier that the Division for which I have responsibility has been active in supporting the design, development, and implementation of information and documentation systems for more than twenty years, indeed from the very beginning of IDRC. Also, I believe the record speaks for itself, and that there is concrete evidence that important information infrastructures have been created. However, during the last few years, I have come to believe that some critical questions have yet to be answered, and important information has to be collected to determine the degree to which the creation of these information/documentation structures indeed impact or have a positive effect on the process of development. Thus, for at least the last four years, I have been attempting, through various assessment and evaluation activities and initiatives to find tangible evidence to support the assumption that documentation and development are inexorably linked.

For example, I wanted a better understanding about how decision-makers, policy-makers, and those who controlled resources made their decisions. Upon what information did they base their policy decisions, and if they did understand the process of information gathering, what did they consider to be the most important sources of information. I was also interested in their perspective of their role in the "information chain", both in disseminating and receiving information.

East and Southern Africa was the first region in which a study to address these questions was undertaken. Four years ago, most of the effort was directed to sensitizing and informing the policy-makers of what exactly was being asked of them. For yes, while it was true that they knew of the existence of libraries and documentation centres, often under their administrative responsibility, the concept of information and its access as a critical component in the planning and policy formulation process was novel, and in some instances, not easily accepted. However, even then, when concrete examples were given, such as "the status of a five-year agricultural plan", and "what were the elements which were required to develop that plan", and indeed "what were the factors which caused the plan not to be successfully implemented", there developed an appreciation of the role information could and should play in the development process. At that time, it is interesting to note, the linkage was not yet made between this realization of the importance of information to their decision-making and the existence of the information and documentation services. One may question the responsibility of the information specialist in facilitating this linkage. Fortunately, in this particular example, this realization was to come in time.

But the environment is changing rapidly. For in only four years, requests are currently being received to study and undertake research into the most appropriate mechanisms to ensure that there is equity of access to information required to prepare a dynamic and responsive development agenda. Inherent in these requests are the need to understand how information is transferred, internalized, and acted upon, as well as the need to establish the appropriate physical and human infrastructure required to ensure that information is acquired, organized, and disseminated. What is of equal interest is that these requests,

although small in number, are from all geographic regions which have socio-economic development as their principal agenda item.

When change is observed, one looks for reasons for the change. In trying to understand the new mind-set regarding the importance of documentation in policy formulation and the development process, it is important to look at some of the priority areas on the global development agenda. Specifically, some of the tools which are now available to address the development problems facing us today - i.e. crippling trade deficits, the continuing debt crisis, the management, or lack thereof, of natural resources and the difficult balance between preservation and use of the environment. Technology and its utilization is clearly one of the most critical tools which must be transferred, modified and used to address these amongst other development problems; and understandably, I wish to focus upon the area of information technologies.

There is little doubt that the rapid advancement in the field of information technologies has had a major impact on the change in perception of the role of information or documentation on development. Within the last decade, we have witnessed the advent of technologies which, when properly applied, ensure equity of access to information by those who need it, and once having that information, they can make choices about their own development agenda. We are witnessing for the first time in many regions of the world the individual determining what information she or he wants, and their being a part of the decision-making as to from where the information is to be acquired, and how it is to be used. We are also seeing at the level of the individual, opportunities to complete the information-loop which ensures that the providers of the information receive feed-back as to whether the information responded to or met the pre-identified need.

We all have examples of how documentation is more accurately packaged, targeted and used effectively as a result of technologies such as computer-based messaging systems; CD-ROM and WORM; Local and Wide Area Networks; artificial intelligence or more specifically, expert systems; machine-assisted translation; packet radio/satellite transmission; and as we meet, more technologies are evolving and are being refined. I, for example, am looking forward to witness the impact of a fairly new information technology "virtually reality" and its application to "model simulation". These are indeed exciting times, and as I have stated, those who are responsible for setting the development agenda are acutely aware of the impact these technologies will and are having on development. What is also clear is that if these technologies are not available to those who wish to be full participants in the global development setting agenda, then the disparity and gap between the haves and have-nots will surely increase - and increase at such a rate that "catching-up" will be virtually impossible.

What is not so clear is that the information specialists, those who have responsibility for identifying and responding to information needs, appreciate the full ramifications of the present and evolving information technologies. While it is true that many of the information services and documentation centres make important use of these various technologies, it is not equally true that the specialists enter into meaningful dialogue with those who control the resources and make the policy decisions about the role of these technologies on socio-economic development and empowerment. I am convinced that if the information specialists and documentalists do not themselves become members of the decision-making fora on issues such as the tools required for development, then the gap between understanding the role of information or documentation on

development and understanding the structures required to support that role will become wider; and unfortunately the ability to reduce this gap will become more and more difficult.

The human resource component of the documentation infrastructure is the most important, for it is the documentalist, the information specialist or the information resource manager who must function as a conduit between the target audience and the information source. It is incumbent upon the specialist to have a good understanding of the environment within which the target audience exists and works. This understanding must be matched with an in-depth knowledge of and the skill to use the tools required to process and disseminate the required information. Because of this requirement, it is my strong belief that human resource capacity building or training must be high on the agenda if one is to seriously address the issue of documentation and development. Equal attention must be placed on long-term training, where the focus is on training of trainers in the new aspects of information and documentation sciences; and on short-term training, which is more focused and directed at a specific set of tasks and activities.

I am pleased to note that the first type of capacity building is becoming more evident in those regions of the world where the cadre of information specialists is very weak. For example, in Latin America, there is the unique program at the University of Simon Bolivar. This program is based upon a concept which could serve as a model world-wide. The Andean region is rich with information and documentation practitioners who are managing exciting information programs, focused on specific sectors and using novel approaches to networking and resource sharing. Rather than building a large and expensive bureaucratic university infrastructure, a complex program has



been developed to draw upon the knowledge and experience of these practising information scientists. The benefit has been at least two-fold, for in addition to establishing a much needed program in the field of information science, the students are being presented with a theoretical framework, within which the real world issues and problems can be meaningfully placed. It is encouraging to know that when these student graduate, they will be better prepared to participate in the decision-making forum on information needs, sources, and utilization.

One can see the same development taking place in West Africa, where the University of Ibadan has just completed the first year of the post-graduate program of the African Regional Centre in Information Science, (ARCIS). Although this program was very long in its implementation, as a regional program it is extremely important to the African continent. For, while there is not a lack of library schools, and therefore professional librarians, the concept of information science and documentation is relatively new. However, today at ARCIS, one can see students who possess graduate degrees in fields such as biochemistry, agriculture science, economics, political science, etc. They have chosen to take further graduate studies in information science because they recognize the critical importance of information in the development process and they are committed to the socio-economic development of their region. They are aggressively acquiring the knowledge and the skills to ensure that they are able to credibly influence the decision and policy-makers in using and acting upon accurate, timely, and relevant information. If my expectations are met regarding the success of these two programs, then I am convinced that my concerns about the information specialists not being considered important to the development process will slowly disappear. As mentioned, earlier, these are exciting times!

It must also be underscored that more focused training, or short-termed training is also important. To achieve the objectives to which I have referred, it is often necessary to go into an established information or documentation service and identify the activities which should be undertaken to ensure that the outputs are relevant to the decision and policy-making process within an organization. This could be in the more traditional area of "marketing of services", or in the use of the rapidly changing field of information technologies. It is clear that such services must be built into the program of "continuing education". If this is not the case, then the users may indeed become more aware than the information specialists of the value of information and the tools necessary to acquire, process, and use this information. It is this reverse role which often causes the information specialist to be out of the decision and policy-making processes critical to a development agenda.

Up to this point, I have attempted to present a thesis which states that information specialists have for some time understood the critical importance of documentation to development. In addition, for reasons which have also been discussed, policy-makers and resource allocators are becoming clearly aware of the role of information and its access to the development process. However, if this is to be accepted as true, then, there must be established tangible criteria by which the relevance of documentation for development can be measured. It is not sufficient to just say that it is relevant or that we believe it to be so. This is not an easy undertaking, for one can find in the literature documented attempts to prove the impact of information on decision-making. Crudely stated, it is very difficult to answer the "so-what" question regarding the utilization of information by those who are accountable for managing the processes for development.

It may be useful to give an example of an activity, which my Division is about to help develop and support, and which if successful, should contribute to the establishment of "indicators for relevance". It is important to note that for us, the work is just beginning, and thus, it should be evident that we yet do not have all of the answers.

The Division of Health Sciences in IDRC is currently supporting a major program in community health in Uganda. The project is being managed by the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Makerere, but it is linked to the Ministry of Health through its Extension Program. In the early days of the project negotiation, it was recognized that access to information was important, but primarily from the perspective of the needs of the medical researchers and professors based at the University. Thus, it was believed that the existing library services provided by the University and Medical Libraries would be sufficient to serve their information needs. Very quickly, however, it became clear that the information needs of the health policy-makers and resource allocators, and the information needs of the extension workers could not be met by the traditional library services. The sources of information were inappropriate, the organization and packaging of the information were not relevant to the problem-solving tasks of the targeted audience, and there was not an understanding of the role of information in the process of policy formulation for a National Health Plan for Uganda.

The Information Sciences Division was requested, perhaps at too late a stage, to support the establishment of an appropriate documentation centre which would be a key component in the delivery of a community health program to the country. (I need not underscore the critical importance of the health sector in Uganda today). While I looked forward to participating in this

very important project, because I believed that there was the potential to clearly demonstrate the importance of documentation to a stated national development priority, I did believe, however, that something should be added to this initiative. Suppose it were possible to demonstrate through this proposed activity that the presence of a dynamic documentation service was essential to the success of the development agenda for health in Uganda, then in the future decision and policy-makers would take it as a given that information and the necessary information infrastructure would be included in the formulation of any development agenda, at any level - local, national, regional, or global.

Thus as a research component of this fairly classic documentation service, we are now trying to attach "beacons" or "signals" to some of the key elements of the project. Then after the information service has been implemented and operational for some time, an evaluation will be undertaken to determine the degree to which the availability of the information has had an impact on or been relevant to the development of a health policy for Uganda. The concept of "beacons" is important, for it is necessary to identify and define those critical elements within the information system which will be examined at the time of the evaluation. We also must be able to answer the question as to which activities and outputs are essential for relevance to the development process.

Within the Information Sciences Division, we are at the point of identifying and defining these, and this exercise represents a most exciting challenge. I strongly believe, however, that if we are not able to undertake this type of evaluation, where the indicators are selected at the time of the development of the project, then it will become more and more

difficult to prove concretely the strong and critical linkage between documentation and development.

In my discussions with the convenors of this seminar, I was told that a panel of experts would discuss their respective information systems and services and hopefully use some of my comments as a spring board for presenting their views. I hope that what I have said this morning provides a basis for such a discussion, and I look forward to hearing their presentations.

Finally, in summary, what I have tried to present, without too many specific examples, for they will come later, is my belief that:

- \* documentation and development are inexorably linked, and the information practitioners have long known this to be true;
- \* that we are now seeing strong evidence that the decision and policy-makers and resource allocators have begun to understand the critical importance of information to the development-setting agenda;
- \* that the users of information are moving quickly ahead of the information specialists and documentalists in understanding the critical importance of information technology on empowerment and the development agenda;
- \* that a serious gap exists between understanding that concept and understanding the need for a strong information and documentation infrastructure to



ensure that information can play that important function;

- \* that the responsibility to close that gap lies with the information specialists themselves, and that part of the solution lies in training, both formal and short-term;
  
- \* that without a strong and regular evaluation/assessment component of an information system or documentation service, it will be difficult to sustain the credibility necessary to move aggressively forward in forging the links between documentation and development.