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Information and Documentation Services as a Tool for Improving National Development Planning. A Case Study of Sierra Leone

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INTRODUCTION

Thousands of different monographs, scientific periodicals, technical reports and other documents are published around the world every year. Hundreds of documentation centres and libraries of all kinds are involved in the processing of this huge amount of information and in making it available to users through sophisticated information systems and networks. Advanced techniques, powerful computers, highly developed telecommunications technology and other technical wonders of the "information revolution" are being used in today's battle for the world's social and economic development.

All countries recognize the importance of information in "achieving the supreme goals of equity and justice and involving mass participation and an inter-related system of societal change".¹ There are big differences in the extent to which information is being used as a powerful resource of progress in developed and developing countries. Developed countries already have integrated, high capacity information systems which serve all parts of the society. Developing nations, with their limited financial resources, are struggling to establish, maintain and benefit from partial information systems and small information and documentation units. The development of government information and documentation (INDOC) services in most of the sub-Saharan countries, has a long history. But today, in general, they are disorganized, inefficient, and lack steady financial support. It is common to see some of the information and documentation units, established to serve very specific information needs, lose their orientation and become, more or less, general libraries.

Some of the sub-Saharan countries' INDOC services are at a higher level of development. However, hardly anybody will disagree that the general level of development of these services in tropical Africa is far below the standards of similar services in developed countries. There are dangers of drawing conclusions from one country's experience and

practice. However, Sierra Leone, one of the least developed countries, provides a good illustration of the aims, pace and problems by which the development of these services are characterized.

The effects of sub-Saharan Africa's economic crisis on INDOC services demands answers and subsequent actions on two main questions.

- (i) As part of a political decision on development priorities and national use of scarce financial resources—which INDOC services are needed to foster social development and economic recovery?
- (ii) What should be the role of an INDOC service in the process of rehabilitation of a small African country undergoing economic decline?

This paper attempts to answer these two questions from the context of Sierra Leone's socio-economic reality.

In answer to the first question, if we define planning as "a process of preparing a set of decisions in the future directed at achieving goals by optimal means",² then development planning could be regarded as advance decision-making by the government with respect to future actions aimed at achieving goals of social and economic development. Economic and social development "could not be dissociated and should proceed as integrated aspects of a single phenomenon of development".³ All decision making processes and development planning combine political and economic decisions and require firm knowledge, information and records of previous actions and achievements. Based on this, an INDOC service concentrated on the specific needs of development planners comes as a reasonable solution.

WHY IS INFORMATION NEEDED FOR DEVELOPMENT PLANNING?

Development planning is regarded as information intensive work. This is true of the initial stages of information collecting, and also for information processing and compilation of development plans and reports. It is even more true of the final phase when development planning activities are being monitored and evaluated. As it was stated in the report of the Ad-hoc Panel of Specialists on Information Systems for Development, "information is an essential element in the development planning process and should be used in rationalizing the use of resources".⁴

The rational use of resources coupled with the rational achievement

of development objectives is the main reason for information being required for development planning. However abstract this reason of rationality might seem, it has very practical implications in the everyday work of any development planner.

From the point of view of development planning activities, information and documentation is required for the following reasons:

- (i) to enable development planners to obtain the right picture of past development, present socio-economic reality and trends which could be significant for future development and actions. Information required here is, for example, information on available natural resources, industrial and agricultural production, population, foreign trade, balance of payments, foreign assistance, and so on. By its nature this is a statistical type of information;
- (ii) to ensure the use of advanced technologies, results and experience from either internal or external sources. In this sense development planners require the organized collection of development planning documents and reports from other countries, particularly from countries with similar social and economic conditions. They also require the organized collection of project documents, reports, findings and recommendations, including projects executed either through bilateral or multilateral technical co-operation and the literature on transfer of appropriate new technologies;
- (iii) to help development planners in monitoring implementation of development plans and projects. A constant flow of information is needed to secure implementation of plans and projects in an appropriate manner; to provide a base for proper decision making on corrective actions that have to be undertaken, and to enable the appraisal of plans and projects;
- (iv) to enable development planners to keep pace with new developments in planning and plan implementation techniques. Development planning undergoes constant changes aimed at improving knowledge, understanding, and efficiency of techniques. Besides this personal professional development in the field of planning methodology, it is also necessary to bring achievements from related fields to the attention of development planners, thereby keeping them abreast with the times. Achievements in the fields of computer or telecommunication technology, new drugs, agricultural techniques, seeds and fertilizers, for instance, are of particular relevance to development planning.

REVIEW OF THE GOVERNMENT ACTIONS IN
ESTABLISHING DEVELOPMENT PLANNING INFORMATION AND
DOCUMENTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Keeping in mind the reasons for which information is necessary in development planning, we now turn to a historical review of actions undertaken by the Government of Sierra Leone in establishing an adequate information and documentation infrastructure.

The "information aspect" of development planning, and establishment of the necessary elements of the Sierra Leone information and documentation infrastructure can be observed through different phases:

- First Development Plans, 1946–1960,
- Early Years of Independence, 1961–1969,
- Establishment of the Main Planning Bodies, 1970–1978,
- New Development Planning Concept, 1979–1984, and
- Economic Recovery, from 1985.

The need for development planning in Sierra Leone had been appreciated as early as 1946 when the "Ten-Year Plan for the Development of Sierra Leone, 1946–1955" was drawn up. The main goal of the plan was to guide and foster development in the immediate post-war period. Planning enthusiasm, common in many development and recovery plans at that time, was soon replaced with more realistic and moderate utilities. The "Plan of Economic Development for Sierra Leone, 1949–1955", better known as Child's Plan, was formulated in 1949 by the then Chief Commissioner for Sierra Leone. Few efforts were made during this period to establish any system either for collecting the information needed for development planning or for its monitoring.

When Sierra Leone gained independence in April 1961 a "Ten-Year Plan of Economic and Social Development for Sierra Leone, 1962/63–1971/72" was drawn up by Dr David Carney, the Chief Commissioner. The plan was very ambitious, proposing a development expenditure of some 250 million leones (125 million pounds) during the first 5 years. It envisaged a number of concrete projects, the conducting of basic surveys and research, and the execution of institutional reforms. Unfortunately, the plan encountered difficulties in its early stage and could not be effectively implemented. However, some essential achievements were made. The major development in support of planning was the organization of the Central Statistical Office (CSO) in 1963. A nucleus staff was recruited, a new building constructed and data processing equipment installed. It was organized with assistance from the US Bureau of the Census. In 1963, the first full population census was carried out.* Offset printing equipment was installed in the CSO

* The total population at that time was 2 180 354.

and a Quarterly Statistical Bulletin initiated. In order to improve the planning information base, as well as for the day-to-day activities of the Government, a certain number of surveys were undertaken: the wage and hour survey by the Labour Division; the aerial survey of Sierra Leone by the Surveys and Land Division of the Ministry of Lands;* and survey of railway transportation. Plans were completed for the first nationwide Agricultural Statistical Survey, and progress was made on the mapping of Sierra Leone at a scale of 1:50 000. At the same time an achievement of great importance for development planning was made with the establishment of the Research Department of the Bank of Sierra Leone. Its aim was the collection and analysis of data on money and banking, a crucial element for any monetary policy.

Preparation of a progress report on that period served as a useful preliminary exercise to the drafting of a "Five Year Plan of Economic and Social Development" which covered the period from 1 July 1966 to 30 June 1971. This plan, owing to turbulent times, never passed the draft stage.

The absence of a consistent development strategy and the lack of overall planning for several years, was one of the reasons for the under-utilization of the country's development potential. The pattern of development suffered as a consequence. This was clearly stated in the budget speech delivered by Dr M. S. Forna, the Minister of Finance, in the Sierra Leone House of Representatives, on 8 July 1968.

"For several years now the development budget has been virtually a collection of expenditure items thrown together in a piecemeal fashion. . . . Development means much more than a random collection of projects. It involves at the very least projects of defined priority which are carefully prepared and which permit a co-ordinated exploitation of our economic and human resources".⁵

The period from 1970 to 1978 is an important period in the history of development planning in Sierra Leone. The main elements of the information and documentation infrastructure were set up and appropriate procedures established. In 1970, the Central Planning Unit (CPU) was established within the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning to function as the central planning agency for the country. It was within the Unit's terms of reference to carry out sectoral and macro-economic studies preparatory to formulating a comprehensive medium term plan, to assist the Ministry of Development in the preparation of development projects, and to institute appropriate procedures for appraisal of their progress. Planning and Project Formulation Units were created in two other ministries and the intention was to have them established in all the important sectoral ministries.

*This survey commenced in 1948 and was completed in 1964.

In 1971 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided technical assistance to the CPU in the form of a team of international experts under the project entitled "Assistance in Development Planning". During the course of this project "The Elements for the Formulation of the National Development Plan, 1974/75-1978/79" and the plan itself were prepared. To make the preparation of the National Development Plan possible, further actions, with respect to the improvement of the planning infrastructure, had to be undertaken. The National Planning Council was set up, headed by the President of Sierra Leone. It was assisted by an Inter-Ministerial Committee of Permanent Secretaries, headed by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Development. An Advisory Planning Body was also established, with the aim of involving non-official bodies, such as business, industry, labour, as well as scientists and social workers, in the planning process.⁶

The project identified the necessity of having an information and documentation unit (library), which would

"collect and process documents of importance to the efficient work of the Central Planning Unit. It is therefore proposed to earmark US\$8000 in 1973 and 1974 for the purchase of about 1300 books under the equipment component of the Budget".⁷

At an early stage of this project a specialized library was set up. In August 1973 a librarian, a CUSO volunteer, was recruited to carry out information and documentation activities within the CPU and the newly established library. During the 3 years of his stay in the library, the operations were significantly improved and a considerable number of books and documents were collected, processed and put at the disposal of users. Very soon after the departure of the librarian, as a result of financial difficulties and non-availability of adequate accommodation, library activities were interrupted and important documents were no longer collected, processed and stored. A great part of the collection was lost, including books and documents that were on loan.

In 1975 a new 2-year project, "Assistance in Development Planning and Plan Implementation", was initiated. The emphasis of the first project was on development planning and preparation of a national development plan. The second project was mainly concerned with operational planning, plan implementation activities and the enhancement of the capacity of the national planning machinery. Annual plans and development expenditure budgets were the main project concern. Since priority was given to providing adequate information necessary for following up the progress of plan implementation, the emphasis was placed on statistical services.

"The statistical services assume a new role in a planned economy. Checking on

achievements in order to ensure overall movement in the planned direction will require much better and more up-to-date statistical services. The goal will be to prepare a regular monthly statistical bulletin covering all essential aspects of development".⁸

It is worth noticing that appreciation of the role that information plays in development planning did not end with the statistical information. Particular emphasis was given to project progress reports which were regarded as

"important means of allocating resources to various projects during a given financial year, determining the size and contents of the annual development plans for the ensuing year, and for watching and assessing the pace of implementation of the plan as a whole".⁹

It was assumed that the CPU would prepare regular quarterly, semi-annual and annual surveys on the implementation of the plan and recommend measures for dealing with problems on the available statistical data and progress reports.

Besides these two main sources of information, the National Development Plan also mentioned the importance of other sources such as national accounts, financial information gathered from the Bank of Sierra Leone and from commercial banks, and information gathered by customs, taxes and excise departments.

The world economic situation and difficulties with the realization of the 1974 National Development Plan were the main causes for the Government's "White Paper on Development Strategy for Sierra Leone"¹⁰ for the adoption of the concept of a "rolling plan" for the medium term 1981/82-1985/86. As it was stated in the plan, "the uncertainties in the world markets for many commodities and the deficiencies in Sierra Leone's data base make it imperative to deviate from the past practice of preparing rigid medium term plan".¹¹ With the concept of a rolling plan, the development planning process became very intensive and the necessity for an efficient INDOC service became much greater. The initial detailed elaboration of sectoral programmes covered a 3-year period. At the end of each year, the performance of each sector was supposed to be reviewed and the plan again elaborated for the next 3 years.

Most recently, "A Programme for Rehabilitation and Economic Recovery"¹² gave high importance to re-organization of existing systems for collecting and processing information including national accounts,* statistics, as well as aid co-ordination and monitoring. The programme states that "UNDP is to assist the Ministry of Development

*National accounts have not been published since 1980/1981 and estimates of GNP, prepared by different agencies vary.

and Economic Planning in reviving its library and establishing a documentation centre".¹³

DEVELOPMENT DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

In 1985, Government efforts in the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning coupled with a request for UNDP/UNESCO support, resulted in the approval of the 27-months-long project designed to establish a Development Documentation Centre (DDC). The project's primary consideration was to

"contribute to the efforts being undertaken by the Group of 77 towards the systematic exchange of information in view of promoting and strengthening of technical and economical co-operation among developing countries (TCDC/ECDC). This type of action was defined in the Buenos Aires Plan of Action, the Caracas Programme of Action and in particular by the Second Inter-Governmental follow-up and Co-ordination Committee Meeting held in Tunis, 5-10 September 1983, which recommended that Member States take the necessary steps to establish or strengthen their national information networks".¹⁴

The project provided equipment, locally and internationally recruited personnel, training of staff abroad, reference books, and subscriptions to professional journals. Activities were organized according to the Workplan which emphasized the collecting and processing of documents available within the Ministry. Some efforts were made to improve the information awareness of the development planners and to upgrade the use of information and documentation in the course of development planning. Some 3000 documents were collected, processed and put at the users' disposal in the centre.

The main success of the project was in securing the proper foundation for continuation of the Development Documentation Centre's activities following the termination of the project. In most of the development projects the reliance on externally supplied expertise for libraries, or almost any other service, often fails. Bearing in mind this "human factor problem" and its importance, special consideration was devoted to the training of the project counterpart Librarian/Documentalist. The main criteria for selection of a candidate for training abroad were a permanent job with the Ministry and experience with document processing. The selected candidate, a library assistant by profession, was sent to England where she obtained the MLib degree. After completion of her studies the candidate returned to the DDC and after some intensive in-service training was fully capable of managing the Centre's collection and activities. Some further training of the Librarian/Documentalist in charge of the Centre was offered by the project in the form of a short course on the use of CDS/ISIS software, held in Moscow.

One of the project goals was to establish co-operation with the Pan-African Development Information System (PADIS). In 1989 the Development Documentation Centre was nominated by the Government of Sierra Leone as the national participating centre and a focal point for PADIS.¹⁵ As the first contribution to the PADIS network the DDC offered its "Bibliography of Publications on Sierra Leone, No. 2" published in April 1988.

DEVELOPMENT PLANNING INFORMATION NEEDS

In order to meet the objectives of the project and to guide the DDC in the proper direction, it was necessary to define development planning information needs. It was important to determine: the activities of the development planning process which should be supported by INDOC services, how these services should be organized, and what the link between an organized service and improved development planning should be.

The activities of the *Ministry of National Development and Economic Planning** are divided within three divisions:

- (i) Central Planning Unit (CPU),
- (ii) Central Statistical Office (CSO),
- (iii) Administration, Co-ordination of Technical Aid, and External Economic Relations.

The activities of the CPU and corresponding information service needs of its 17 development planners are of *principal concern* here. According to the concept of organization of the National Development Planning in Sierra Leone, the main activities of the Central Planning Unit are the following:

- (a) Assistance to the regional planning units in formulation of development plans for provinces and districts; co-ordination of the local plans with the National Development Plan;
- (b) Formulation of Annual Plans and the Annual Development Budgets;
- (c) Appraisal of progress, including detailed evaluation of major development programmes and projects;
- (d) Periodic adjustments in various sectoral development programmes, projects and policies and in the National Development Plan itself in the light of appraisal of progress and changes in domestic or international conditions. While most of the adjustments will be made through the Annual Plans, others, occasioned by sudden changes in domestic or international conditions, will be made as and when required. The CPU will also advise Government on changes in *developmental and related economic policies* necessitated by these adjustments; and

*Formerly the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning. Renamed in 1986.

- (e) Long-term studies with a view to formulating long-term perspectives of development for the economy and for important sectors.¹⁶

Unfortunately this list of planning activities is too general for deciding on the specific services which should be carried out by a specialized INDOC service. If we are to define the INDOC activities which should support development planning and reveal their role, we need a somewhat different approach. We need a systematic and comprehensive list of development planning activities taking into account their information needs, complexity and intended function. Adopting this approach, development planning activities and the corresponding information needs could be classified into four main areas.

- (i) General activities. Training and continuous education of development planners; keeping up-to-date with new techniques, technologies, and developments in economic theory; publishing and dissemination activities.
- (ii) Data collection. These activities are mainly covered by the statistical department (CSO), and other departments which are collecting data on economic development, financial, natural and human resources relevant to development planning.
- (iii) Analysis. Information processing, decision making, plan and project preparation, macro-economic planning (monetary, fiscal, price and income policy, and foreign trade and balance of payments policy), sectoral planning (economic and social), project planning, development budget planning.
- (iv) Implementation and monitoring activities. These activities primarily include implementation, evaluation and monitoring of development plans and projects. Co-ordination of foreign economic and technical assistance is monitored to some extent through the Ministry of National Development, so some appropriate measures should also be undertaken to support this kind of activity.

SUBJECT AND GEOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE

Subject coverage corresponds to those areas of the national economy which are considered to be the priorities of the National Development Plan. In the case of Sierra Leone it is agriculture, forestry, fisheries, macro-economics, energy and power, small-scale industry and health services. These are the subject areas which deserve special attention in building a document collection. Subject coverage is also a factor for determining whether the needs and requests of development planners

are met, and for designing selective dissemination of information (SDI).

The geographical coverage of information and documentation needed for development planning in Sierra Leone includes, in addition to information and documentation related to the country itself, the Member States of the Mano River Union (Liberia and Guinea), selected African countries with similar conditions and some other developing countries in the world.

Apart from the statistical information, which is provided mainly by the Central Statistical Office, the types of information and documentation that should in addition be processed and kept by the development planning documentation centre are:

- development planning documentation (development plans, reports, budgets and policy statements);
- development project documentation (project documents and reports, feasibility studies, mission reports, project findings and recommendations);
- periodicals on development and economic planning;
- monographs, mainly reference books (in particular United Nations handbooks and manuals).

THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND DOCUMENTATION SERVICE

The role of an INDOC service is to provide a better information base which could be utilized for improved national development planning and therefore foster the process of economic and social rehabilitation. This role could be translated into very practical actions with direct implications for national development planning in Sierra Leone. It has been concluded that the role of an INDOC service in development planning, according to its corresponding activities is:

- to provide information and documentation on development to those involved in national planning;
- to establish a collection of development projects and related reports, and to put them at the disposal of development planners for monitoring and evaluation purposes;
- to channel information and experience on development, development planning and development projects from other countries to Sierra Leone;
- to help avoid wasting human, natural and economic resources;
- to enable the use of obtained results and experience gained elsewhere in development planning;

- to upgrade the use of information and documentation provided by different international organizations and foreign information systems;
- to lower the total cost of national development through rational use of freely available information and documentation resources; and
- to heighten the awareness of development planners, as information users, of the value of information and documentation as a tool for increasing the efficiency of national development planning.

CONCLUSIONS

Information and documentation collection and adequate user services enable development planners to benefit from the huge amount of accumulated knowledge and to incorporate it into the plans or projects on which they are working. This is realized either through a process of upgrading methodology, or through the use of results and experience, available worldwide. The work of development planners is facilitated, to a great extent, if document collection is comprehensive, well organized, easily accessible and if the user services are carried out by trained and experienced staff. This, along with an intensive use of information and documentation, contributes to the quality of national plans which undoubtedly become more realistic and reliable.

Social and economic rehabilitation of any of the sub-Saharan countries is a complex process demanding great effort from society. Only the carefully planned, combined efforts of all, in conjunction with a maximum use of available resources can bring about much needed prosperity and development. Although an INDOC service designed to fulfil the information and documentation needs of development planners is just one dimension of gradual societal change, prospects for rehabilitation and economic recovery in sub-Saharan Africa would be enhanced if maximum use were made of all available internal and external information and documentation resources.

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