Building Capacity for International Librarianship through Intercultural Professional Partnerships and Civil Society Outreach in Tanzania

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I recently had the pleasure of serving with a team of academics in Canada and Tanzania on an international project, Building Civil Society Capacity for Poverty Reduction. Canada's Huron University College established a partnership with the University of Dar es Salaam's Institute of Development Studies to reinvigorate their curriculum. Graduate programs were redesigned and expanded to engage civil society organizations and provide graduate students with service learning experiences. A pilot study on information access facilitated fieldwork and the engagement of librarians in Canada and Tanzania by investigating information needs at the village level. This rural and remote case study highlighted the participatory processes necessary for collaboration between academics, civil society organizations, and community members.

This project renewed facilities and collections for graduate students and a small district public library, an effort that included introducing Swahili language materials. This chapter will review some of the project design strategies, which emphasize participation in order to strengthen outcomes.
The university in Dar es Salaam and faculty from Canada have been working for over ten years on this partnership. Tanzania’s poverty-reduction strategy includes next-generation solutions. To reduce poverty, youth must be educated and graduates must be able to participate fully as citizens. Librarianship is part of the task of creating a civil society with access to information about strengthening poverty reduction strategies and increasing participation.

In its Vision 2025, Tanzania describes itself as a middle-income country in which absolute poverty has been eradicated. At present, however, Tanzanians still struggle with many challenges, including food security. According to the Global Hunger Index 2013, more people are undernourished in Tanzania than in any East African country except Burundi. Developing access to information and resources for civil society is part of the government’s strategy of reaching the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Tanzania’s multiethnic and multilingual society has been a beacon of predominantly peaceful democratic traditions, allowing for elections and political administrations that have not faced the upheavals of some of its East African neighbors.

However, the largely rural poor have not shared in recent growth and continue to live without adequate access to education, food security, and healthcare. The university partners are determined to work with rural Tanzanians regardless of language or ethnicity, and introduce graduate student researchers to alleviate some problems with access to information.

PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT

No matter how hard we try to shed cultural baggage, the unfortunate reality about working with libraries outside North America and Europe is that a colonial past often hampers good working relationships. Creating a framework that bolsters strong partnerships, joint responsibilities, and clear and equally shared delegation of authority goes a long way toward establishing effective project teams. This is always the case, but is particularly useful when partners with cultural, linguistic, and historical differences are trying to establish a locally sustainable program.

For example, the advisory committee in the donor country should not decide which equipment is best suited for the project, just because purchases can be made and shipped to the partner. Equipment budgets and specifications should be the result of a local dialogue, which determines the long-term sustainability of maintaining facilities, equipment, and collections.
A framework of responsibilities can be developed from the start through a variety of tools, such as Results-Based Management, a project-management process employed by large organizations such as the Canadian International Development Agency and the Canadian government. This moves work objectives away from specifics, such as counting books.
Table 10.1. Results Based Management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Logic Model</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Reporting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve access to information for rural and remote villagers in areas of priority, such as improving maternal and child health, getting access to education, better animal husbandry, and water resource management.</td>
<td>Rationale: Better information can improve decision-making in health, agriculture, and education.</td>
<td>A baseline study of villagers to assess needs and restraints as identified by the locals. Measure population, identify schools, clinics, vet and ag extension offices, and other supports.</td>
<td>A journal of activities to measure and report on Village Information Officers.</td>
<td>Midterm review and annual reports, and final report deadlines.</td>
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<td>Assumption: There is local, relevant support to address priority needs in district government and local NGO sector. Print resources are not read by most people, don't reach village government offices, and aren't in local languages.</td>
<td>Village council meetings to establish information needs of villagers.</td>
<td>A meeting with Village officials to review actions taken on priority issues.</td>
<td>An assessment with local government officials on solutions provided for priorities.</td>
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<td>Resources: Cellphones and local government officials can provide access to better information.</td>
<td>Interviews with key local officials and elders to identify priorities, threats to progress, and opportunities.</td>
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added to the collection, to more substantial results, such as improved 
access to information and promotion of a reading culture.

Some key considerations in developing the project and action plan 
are:

**When?**
Is your trip to the project area planned for the rainy season 
when roads are impassable, or for holidays when key people 
are away?

**Who?**
Have you surveyed only those who showed up, or do you 
plan to talk to those who are sick at home, who are unable 
to travel due to childcare responsibilities, or who speak a 
dialect but don’t read the official language?

**How?**
Are you making assumptions about who does what in this 
community? Perhaps men and women have different ideas 
about this topic, based on different responsibilities at home 
and work. Can you employ a process that encourages gender 
disaggregation of results?

Techniques such as meeting with community leaders to learn local 
issues and prioritize needs can inform a project by tying it to existing 
realities. Dividing up women and men into small groups for discussion, 
and valuing youth, elders, and children can create a fuller picture of the 
community. Using groups to create maps of a place such as a campus 
or village can highlight issues that are important to people who are not 
fluent in literate cultures that demand written submissions and reports 
to create background documents. There are many participation strategies 
to choose from, and they all help form relationships, build a strong base 
for future work, and increase options when unforeseen circumstances 
require project plans to be redirected.

Tight or nonexistent acquisition budgets in many African libraries 
can lead to decisions based not on collection or user assessment, but simply 
on lack of materials. Full shelves are better than empty ones, aren’t they? Using input from baseline research and other participatory pro-
cesses can lead to better decisions than filling shelves with second-hand 
materials cast off from North American libraries. This project developed
a selection tool every year and used it in academic and public library systems to support project-funded acquisitions. In our village case study, cellular telecommunications afforded easier access to government officials and information, thereby enabling more effective decision-making. The fact that virtually everyone has access to phones and is familiar with their use removes barriers print-based resources create where most citizens are not literate in the official language of government.

**CULTURAL ANALYSIS IN THE PROJECT ENVIRONMENT**

The context of a library project is always unique, and skills related to an environmental scan or a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) are extremely useful. At the initial stages, the team or project leader should be able to draw an accurate picture of the project context. We developed the initial project documents for a large grant with a team of academics, including librarians and faculty, who were equally balanced between Tanzanian nationals and Canadians with international experience.

Following that, a baseline study was developed and implemented with the fieldwork of Tanzanian faculty and graduate students. They made multiple trips and developed case studies, resulting in selection of the best pilot sites, which had support of local leaders and municipal government. Locals translated in this trilingual, multiethnic project environment. This heavy investment in building a collaborative environment was validated over and over as local officials demonstrated support for decisions and project sustainability.

Key results of working with local leaders:

1. Local elders identified priority information needs, highlighting current problems with water, animals, children, and health.

2. Local elders allowed project staff into council meetings.

3. Local elders appointed Village Information Officers, giving them access to council meetings and the right to speak.

Without these initial meetings with leaders, there would have been less information about the type of data needed to support strong communities and fewer opportunities for project volunteers, such as Village Information Officers, to be integrated into decision making.
Given our choice to work with poor and rural Maasai villagers in the first case study, it was important to validate their cultural traditions and apply successful information-gathering practices from their cultural heritage. The Village Information Officer model was based on the traditional role that young men run from boma (homestead) to boma spreading information. The use of a model representing a successful cultural practice strengthened the sustainability of the collaboration and laid the foundation for work that was easy to translate between three working languages and cultures. There was no need to explain the reason for using young people as a source of information or validating the place of the Village Information Officer in local council meetings. The new responsibilities were a good fit with old ideas about gathering information and spreading it in the community.

The analysis of gender roles within the local environment helped identify differences between women and men in the project environment. The creation of specific groups to request input from both men and women helped clarify differences in their information priorities. They also adopted traditional models of separate women's and men's councils. The importance of stressing the need for both a man and woman to be information officers from each village was justified by both cultural practices and differences stated in the baseline study between women and men. For example, women retrieve water and fuel wood—they are more concerned with water and forest management. Men, on the other hand, prioritize livestock and veterinarian services, and are concerned with grazing rights and market sale of animals. These different priorities are equally important and were represented in the life of the project due to the explicit goal of using gender analysis as a tool.

LOCAL CONTENT

Relevant local content is the cornerstone of a successful library project. The challenges of access to good-quality local information resources remain, whether we consider books or digital objects. While we supported use of oral culture in one case study, we purchased books for the second case study to support a small district public library in Baganoyo. Despite the fact that books disintegrate rapidly in the humid coastal climate, we determined that it was important to support local curriculum and purchase textbooks for public borrowing. With the support of local book distributors, we selected and purchased the books.

Several Canadian organizations are strong supporters of development of the local book chain in the Global South. CODE Canada works
with a Tanzanian NGO, Children's Book Project. Through this connection, I learned how local authors are involved in award competitions for new books. The winning entries judged by local experts are published and distributed to school libraries. This ensures that quality books are promoted and that new local authors have a chance to thrive where few opportunities exist for advancing a reading culture for adults who are often unable to purchase reading materials in their mother tongue.

CHALLENGES OF COLLABORATION

Many challenges of teamwork are evident in the collaboration required for international projects. Some of these are mired in the realities of poverty and inequality. Creating a project framework that anticipates challenges is fundamental. International colleagues in the Global South may not have access to credit cards, while travel to North America requires credit card transactions for tickets, accommodations, transportation, and numerous other logistical details. For starters, try not to assume that your colleagues are able to share various financial aspects of the project.

With repeated requests for rigorous reporting, we frequently transmit negative stereotypes about lack of financial accountability in countries of the Global South. This can affect project outcomes. The relative nonexistence of receipts for goods, invoices for sales, and itemized records for contracts and labor costs is frequently poorly understood by those accustomed to more complex business practices. It would never occur to most people to question whether the project team has differing values and constraints placed on them by financial transactions and other differences in the local business environment.

Trying to comprehend different financial practices and values makes it easier to reach compromises, fulfilling needs for accurate reporting and outcomes. Not sure whether the carpenter is charging too much? Don’t use a foreigner to obtain estimates. A local project leader will employ the budget wisely if there is an incentive to get the most for their project and they feel ownership and responsibility to their fellow villagers or colleagues.

Is there generally a lack of paper receipts for work, and are there no time sheets for labor charges? First, determine whether it is best to bring receipt books or create logbooks for staff and volunteers to track charges and labor expenses. Perhaps a customary practice already exists that will work best if the project can adapt it to the reporting requirements. Try to be explicit about money matters from the start and discuss issues as they arise.
Governance structures and processes can reinforce strengths and weaknesses in project environments. If the balance of the project team is well matched, then the partnership can respond when challenges arise. Locals may provide alternatives that work in the real world. Foreign nationals can bring alternative suggestions into the project to test and trial.

Time expended in sound project design and balanced team composition pays off down the road. Likewise, the language and materials the project operates can either increase or reduce participation. Is there a common language? Can time be taken for translation and interpretation during meetings, or is it more effective to have bilingual and trilingual team members facilitate cross-cultural encounters? Promotion of plain language usage and support for oral cultures and multilingual resources are additional tools to increase the number of people who can actively support and participate. Closing the door to multiple languages decreases the breadth of a project beyond the teams’ boundaries.

After the project achieves its stated mission, issues can still remain to be ironed out. This requires practice on the ground and review of what has been implemented. Despite our best efforts to reach out and support a district library with books that matched local classroom reading lists, we still discovered that although the books were cataloged, they were not on display in the library. Obviously, a crucial set of questions hadn’t been posed. Possibly they feared that books would be stolen, perhaps it was perceived that they should only be displayed when students visited. There may have been other rational factors to restrict access that we never considered. An open dialogue can arise only if project partners believe their concerns and ideas are listened to respectfully. Clearly, we hadn’t spent enough time in the library to become aware of them. Once we requested that books be put on display, local librarians were happy to comply.

With our local partners, we produced a broad array of project outcomes:

1. **Capacity development**: We strengthened the capacity of University of Dar es Salaam to offer gender-equitable programming on civil society and poverty reduction for students and civil society organizations through a curriculum renewal process. New programs were developed and implemented, new courses are being offered, and students are gaining field experience working with local groups.
2. **Information resources and services development:** We increased, sustained, and provided equitable access to gender-inclusive information on civil society and poverty reduction, primarily through the library of the University of Dar es Salaam (USDM) and its Graduate Resource Centre of the Institute for Development Studies. Over 300 books were donated and cataloged for student access in the main library, a renovated graduate student center, and the district library of Bagamoyo.

3. **Outreach:** A successful case study engaged Village Information Officers and local officials in responding to information needs in remote and rural villages. A partnership with one district library led to better access to local language materials for students after more than sixty books were acquired and cataloged.

This international partnership was a success by several measures. One key indicator is the strengthening of ties. There is no doubt that this will lead to other successful collaborations. Partners in both countries will entertain new proposals to continue collaboration. We hope that these results will inspire others to initiate new projects.

Tanzanian graduate students, a multiethnic and multilingual group, and undergraduates from Canada were integral to the project’s attributes. They permitted work on the ground to be carried out as planned, managing all the inevitable bumps along the way. The completion of two master’s degrees and support of three PhD candidates were additional outcomes. The fact that over half the Canadian students stayed or returned to work in Tanzania confirms that these aspects of service learning are effective means of professional development.

Development of this undertaking through a lengthy partnership and engagement process assured its outcome. It suggests an alternative to top-down models of collaboration across borders, which are frequently driven by tight deadlines and external indicators for success. The lasting impact within the university through the curriculum renewal process and strengthening of library facilities and collections is broadly shared and continues to produce rewards for students. Lastly, thanks to solid relationships between graduate students and villagers, Village Information Officers demonstrated a positive model for information access between local government officials and local leaders. Undoubtedly, future collaborations will enhance our strong and deep ties, which bind us together despite the distance.
REFERENCES


