Access and Accountability:
Democratization of Information in Post-Conflict Societies

Anneli Sundqvist

The purpose of this session is to present the background and the out-line of a forthcoming research project about the role of archives and records in the promotion of accountability and transparency in governance, and the relation between recordkeeping and access to information in the process of democratization and transition of post-conflict societies. Preliminary objects of study will be Sierra Leone and Liberia.

A population emerging from a time of war has many expectations: justice for victims; economic recovery and development that can generate employment and prosperity; social services like education and healthcare; and not the least electricity, water and the rehabilitation of infrastructure. To meet these expectations it is necessary to build a functioning civil society, in which *all* citizens are included and can participate in public affairs.

This can be described with the concept *Good Governance.* Good governance is defined as the process of public institutions conducting public affairs and managing public resources, while guaranteeing the realization of human rights, in a manner free of abuse and corruption and recognizing the rule of law (*Human Rights in Development*). The key characteristics of good governance are transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation of the whole people, both men and women, and responsiveness to the peoples' needs.

The general assumption behind this presentation that Good Governance is to a large extent effectuated by the documentation of decision processes and actions, and making the resulting documentation accessible to the citizens. I.e. the creation, management and dissemination of trustworthy records, which will further be referred to as *recordkeeping*. Recordkeeping is among the most important means of power and control, and an indispensable part of bureaucratic systems. It can be used by repressive regimes, but the irony is that it cut both ways. It is also the perhaps most efficient instrument to control regimes. Through access to information people can assess the performance of government, call for responsibility and accountability, demand compensation for injustice, and enhance their knowledge and freely evolve opinions (e.g. Masire 2004). People being aware of their rights and being able to act on them by making use of the public information is an important aspect of the creation of an engaged civil society. *Access* to information and public records are thus of crucial importance in the reconstruction of a post-conflict civil society, and is recognized as a right for citizens in a democratic society in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 19).

Access can be understood as legal, physical and intellectual (Pugh 1992). Legal access concerns the right and permission to use records, and physical access address security, location, opening hours, space and facilities including information systems. Intellectual access relates to "the process of identifying and locating records likely to contain information useful for solving problems" (Pugh, 1992, p. 6). The last can be related to the concept of *information literacy*, i.e. competencies that an individual need to participate in the information society (e.g. Shapiro, J. and Hughes, S, 1996), but also to the availability of usable means of providing, searching and retrieving information.

The obstacles to enhanced access are many. Legal and political obstacles are due to corruption and political reluctance to empower the people. In Sierra Leone, Liberia and other post-colonial countries, the legal and administrative structures are patterned on the institutions of the colonial powers. Those were often conflicting with local traditions and legal practices, thus making the bureaucracy less transparent. On the other hand, post-colonial takeover has in some cases meant a deterioration of administrative practices, which together with widespread corruption and abuse of office has lead to inefficiency and ill-functioning procedures (Barata & Cain, 2001).

Recent years the ICT-revolution has widely enhanced the potential to create, disseminate and access information, which should imply that the physical access to information has increased. However, the distribution of technology is uneven. It is only those with access to ICT, information skills, and such elementary commodities as electricity and telephone connections, that are fully benefiting from these advancements. The *Digital Divide* is a concept that has flourished in political and cultural debate the last decade, emphasizing the perceived increasing gap between those who have, and those who have not access to societal and commercial benefits provided by information technology, mainly the internet (Gurstein, 2003). Developing countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia with poor communication infrastructure and low diffusion of the Internet are still lagging behind as far access to information is concerned. The West African Region has for instance the lowest regional e-government readiness index according to the United Nations E-Government Survey 2008.

Table 1: Statistics on ICT infrastructure and usage

Indicators	Sierra Leone	Liberia	Sweden
Internet per 100 users	0,19	0,03	76,97
PC per 100 users	--	--	83,49
Cellular phone subscribers per 100 users	2,21	4,87	105,92
Main telephone lines per 100 users	0,49	0,21	59,52
Broadband per 100 users	0,00	0,00	25,87

Source: United Nations E-Government Survey 2008

This cleavage, as argued by for instance Hellström, is due to lack of political will, the slow diffusion of new technologies and the uneven distribution of wealth. This means that the digital divide has

reinforced the already existing poverty patterns (Hellström, 2005, p. 1). The regions that previously participated in the industrial era and benefited from it, are the ones benefitting from current Internet technology, while there are countries that are still struggling to put in place basic communication infrastructure such as the radio or telephone services.

However, access to technology is only one part of the problem. Records are complex by nature, because of their origin in complex social processes. Thus, it requires certain skills and knowledge first to locate the relevant records, then to find the relevant item, and finally to interpret and understand the content. Records are usually not directly accessible, but through an intermediary, an information system. A high level of illiteracy and a general low level of education, by which follows a lack of information literacy, make up further obstacles to access to records. Another factor is the multi-lingual population of many post-conflict societies, where the needs of various lingual and ethnic groups have been oppressed or at least not recognized.

Table 2: Statistics on literacy

Indicators	Sierra Leone	Liberia	Sweden
Population*	5 866 000	3 750 000	9 119 000
Adult literacy**	34,8	51,9	99,0
Gross enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education**	44,641	57,407	95,270

*Sources: *World Population Prospect. The 2006 Revision, ** United Nations E-Government Survey 2008*

This makes the role of intermediaries, i.e. usable information systems and not the least qualified information professionals, very important. However, lack of professional competence in handling information is a severe problem in many developing countries (Kargbo 2002; 2005).

The challenges of the democratization of information in developing and post-conflict societies are thus many, and handling these challenges needs resources but also research. Despite the general recognition of access to information as a corner-stone of democracy, little attention has been paid to its function in the process of democratisation and re-building of a civil society in post-conflict regions. Very little empirical research addressing these issues has been conducted so far, but a few studies have been undertaken from the perspective of archival science.

The role of records and documentation of atrocities committed against the people has for instance been addressed by a few researchers. Montgomery (2004) holds that the documentation of atrocities committed against the people by the armed militias and conventional armies is an effective way of exposing such deeds to the public and to international scrutiny and criticism. According to him, recorded violations provide a lasting accountability of the actions of the perpetrators and in the past where justice has not been delivered, "the historical verdict has often served as the only tribunal for human

rights perpetrators,"(Montgomery 2004, p. 23). Adami & Hunt (2005) link archival theory to international criminal justice and recognise the unique aspects of archival practices in an international organisation that deals with genocide and other crimes against humanity.

The need for information and the importance of libraries, archives, media and educational institutions in the process of development and transition to a democratic society has been emphasised by Kargbo (2002; 2005). This problem is also recognised by Kemoni et al (2003), who state that African archives are underutilized as information sources. This is partly due to professional problems like lack of recognition of archives by governments, obsolete legislation, lack of professional training, inadequate service, and inadequate or non-existent access tools. Another impacting factor is lack of appropriate hardware and software and user-friendly systems, lack of knowledge using information technology, costs, and the vulnerability of digital information. The same problems in an administrative setting, an Nigerian university, were recognized by Uwaifo (2004). Use of records were necessary tools of planning and decision making, but access was obstructed by lack of records management standards, lack of professional staff, defective security systems and unreliable power supply.

Considering this background, the research group in Archives and Information Science at Mid Sweden University project has designed a project aiming at study the role of records in the democratization of information in post-conflict societies, and specifically the relationship between recordkeeping and access to information. The project has been preceded by a series of minor studies about the dissemination of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' records in Sierra Leone and Liberia (e.g. Svärd 2007; Svärd & Sundqvist 2007). The project is planned to be launched next year as a one-year pilot project. General areas of interest are:

- use of the records and users' needs
- methods of dissemination of information
- the barriers and facilitators to public access to information
- management & long-term preservation of records

These areas of interest will be explored and elaborated into specific research problems, and appropriate methods will be identified for undertaking such research in post-conflict societies where literacy and information literacy is not universal. The result of the pilot study will be:

- a comprehensive literature survey;
- definition of research questions;
- identification of a methodological and theoretical framework appropriate for the research problems;
- development of strategies for further research on democratization of information in post-conflict societies;
- establishment of a research network.

The theoretical standpoint is the *records continuum model*, according to which records are considered to continuously take part in different social processes (Upward, 2005). The records continuum model provides a meta-theoretical tool for the project, providing a conceptual framework and a holistic

approach; regarding creation, management, dissemination and use of records and information as embedded in a wider socio-cultural and institutional context. From this general framework different units of analysis can be identified.

The results should provide prerequisites for a forthcoming research program considering the role and function of records and recordkeeping, and the development of a framework for a sustainable information infrastructure in the context of post-conflict developing countries. Due to the complexity of the problems, there is call for a more comprehensive research agenda. This would include for instance basic social science research about the socio-cultural role of information and documentation; about the users of information and user communities; and about the need for and use of information for various purposes. There is also need for more applied and action oriented research about the development of means for dissemination of information in a multi-lingual and largely illiterate environment (an interesting approach would be the possibility of using of so called adaptive technologies, developed to support disabled persons, for these purposes, c.f. Hertz 2000); the role of intermediaries and information professionals; and methods and strategies for management and preservation of information and documentation, particularly in digital or compound formats, considering the particular institutional and socio-economical circumstances in post-conflict and developing countries.

Such comprehensive research program is suited for international collaboration, and contributions are welcome.

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