

# *Information Seeking Behavior of the Informal Sector Entrepreneurs: The Uganda Experience*

ROBERT IKOJA-ODONGO AND DENNIS N. OCHOLLA

East African School of Library and Information Science, Makerere University, Kampala Uganda;  
Department of Library and Information Science, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa South Africa

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This article reports the results of a study aimed at identifying the information needs and uses of the informal sector in Uganda. The demographic and business characteristics of these entrepreneurs are highlighted and empirically tested with regard to their information needs. This study has largely employed qualitative research methodologies, such as the critical incidence technique for interviews with 602 informal sector entrepreneurs from a variety of trades. Observations of the entrepreneurs' work environments and historical methods were also employed. The results suggest that modern/exotic models of information transfer based on textual

media and ICT exhibit less impact on the entrepreneurs' information needs and use at macro levels because of poverty, illiteracy and poor information infrastructure. It is however noted that most 'elite' models share a platform with information behaviour of entrepreneurs at the micro levels. The study concludes that an appropriate model for information behaviour for the information poor community must be grounded on oral traditions and indigenous knowledge and be sensitive to poverty, infrastructure and illiteracy. Recognition is also made of the need for information repackaging and the use of appropriate media for information provision.

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## *Introduction*

Uganda is an East African country with a developing economy, though one that is counted among the least developed in the world. Its economy depends both on formal and informal sectors. The Informal Sector (I. S.) in Uganda grew at an annual rate of 25% between 1995 and 1998 (Katumba 1998, 5). Factors contributing to this growth include retrenchments in the public service, lay-offs in public enterprises, demobilization of soldiers, the increasing number of school dropouts without formal employment, the on-going rural-urban migration, the increasing entry of women and children into the informal sector, "frozen" vacant positions in the public sector (Ssemogerere 1996, 13) and the automatic entry of il-

literate people into the sector (Katabira 1995, 45). The I. S. is the main bulwark against unemployment, destitution and crime (Ministry of Planning Economic Development [MPED] 1989, 162). In Uganda this sector has also grown out of economic crises that the country experienced in the 1970s and the early 1980s. These were because of the collapse of the formal sector in the 1970s, the expulsion of enterprising Asians during the same period, the political instability of the 1970s and 1980s (Okumu 1995, 8), and the failure of the modern (protected) sector to cope with the growing number of job seekers and structural adjustment programs entailing stringent reductions in the growth of recurrent expenditure in government as well as in the public sector organizations. Presumably, one important factor in the success of

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Robert Ikoja- Odongo (PhD) is an associate professor at the East African School of Library and Information Science, Makerere University P.O Box 7062, Kampala Uganda. E-mail: Robert\_ikoja@yahoo.com  
Dennis Ocholla (PhD) is professor and Head of the Department of Library and Information Science, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa 3886, South Africa. E-mail: docholla@pan.uzulu.ac.za

the I. S. enterprises is access to information. The purpose of this study was to determine the information needs and uses of the I. S. in Uganda (see Ikoja-Odongo 2001, 2002; Ikoja-Odongo and Ocholla 2003).

Since its entry into the research and academic vocabulary in early 1970s, the concept of the I. S. has been interpreted in different ways, many names have been used in different parts of the world where it exists and it has been described rather negatively. Names like unofficial, parallel, undeclared, concealed, creeping, clandestine, alternative, marginal, independent, submerged, invisible, illegal, unobserved, fraudulent, hidden, submarine, secondary, underground, dual, secret, black, irregular, veiled, peripheral, shadow, informal, disguised, grey, counter-economy, wangling economy and "lower circuit" of the urban economy (Karl 2000, 54) have all been used. These names denote different attributes and have different connotations but many of them appear to mean that the I.S. is an illegal phenomenon simply because they appear to escape taxation or the purview of current societal measurement.

In East Africa where Uganda is found, the sector is largely a private sector of the economy that supports lower income earners and therefore assumes befitting names such as *Jua Kali* or *Nguvu Kazi*. These names derive from the Kiswahili (East African popular language) words. *Jua Kali* means the "hot sun". *Jua* is the "sun", *Kali* means "very hot". *Jua Kali* is a Kenyan phrase and the colloquial name given to those enterprises operating informally and mostly without shelter or in the open air or under very difficult conditions. Tanzania uses the name *Nguvu Kazi*. '*Nguvu*' is a Kiswahili word for "strength" while '*Kazi*' means 'work'. Translated into business, it refers to activities that require a lot of energy to produce anything. Uganda lacks a proper name simply because Ugandans' knowledge of Kiswahili is limited since they use English and indigenous languages mostly. But being an East African country, the descriptions given by Kenya and Tanzania are most appropriate. In summary, the I.S. is that part of a developing economy that works in very difficult conditions and its practitioners use a lot of effort to produce goods and services.

What is even more significant about it in Uganda is that it is visible and operates in the open, is rampant, dynamic and found in rural and urban

areas alike operating alongside the formal sector. It comprises a diversity of small and micro enterprises and trades that are widely spread throughout the country. It excludes illicit activities like smuggling, money laundering and drug trafficking that are hidden, secret or underground. The sector employs males and females; adults, youth and children; the literate, semi-illiterates and illiterates; and able and disabled people alike. It is characterized by routine work involving innovation, imitation and duplication of products and services where artisans acquire wide experience, compensating for their limited education. It provides goods and services to a majority of low-income earners, making extensive use of local raw materials, employing adaptive technology. The sector demonstrates low levels of productivity given that they are labour intensive and as a consequence of low division of labour, low incomes, low capital intensity, flexible hours of operation, low level of formal credit, and ease of entry and departure. It is also characterized by a wide variety of employment statuses and labour relationships (ILO 1998, 181). The I.S. is influential on a majority of entrepreneurs who recognize it as an entrepreneurial sector for helping themselves in a number of ways including generating income for survival, fighting poverty, saving themselves from stress for lack of self-support or gainful employment. It is an income situation to deploy already available skills, obtain training and gain experience, or individual may enter the sector because of peer influence.

The theoretical framework used here is based on related international studies concerning literature and theory in the field of information behaviour namely seeking, searching, evaluation, retrieval and use (e.g. Belkin et al. 1982; Dervin 1995, 1999; Dervin and Nilan 1986; Ingwersen 1986, 1992, 2000; Muchionini 1992; Wilson 1981, 1994, 1997, 1999; Xie 2000). Similar studies have been completed in parts of Africa as well (e.g. Kaniki 1991, 1995; Mchombu 1982; Mchombu 1998; Ocholla 1998, 1999; Ocholla and Ikoja-Odongo 2002; Ikoja-Odongo and Ocholla 2003.)

### *Methodology*

The qualitative design (see Neuman 2000) of the study was generally based on the traditional survey, utilizing critical incident interviews (see

Flanagan 1954; Fisher & Oulton 1999; Allen in Hewins 1990, 148) and unobtrusive observation methods and techniques. The survey population was drawn to represent the national population sample, and involved purposive or judgmental sampling techniques as well as proportionate and disproportionate stratified sampling from six Ugandan districts and consisted of 602 entrepreneurs, 23 organization representatives, and 35 informants in the I.S. Basically, three instruments were used: 1) interview schedules, 2) observation where incidences were recorded in a self-observation guide consisting of five sections on characteristics of informal businesses, management system in the informal enterprises, relationship between the I.S. and the society, communication methods in the work environment and finally 3) problems in the workplace (utilizing voice recording and photography, as exhibits) as well as analysis and review of recorded sources. Interviews were conducted with 602 respondents over the duration of six months.

Data analysis for qualitative research designs such as content analysis and verbal argument was employed. Quantitative techniques were used for the analysis of quantifiable data that was subsequently presented textually using descriptive statistics, as will be summarized below.

### *Research findings*

This section reports largely the responses obtained from the 602 entrepreneurs. However, an attempt is made to consider the data sets collected via the observation method that provided additional information for this study. It comprises characteristics of the I.S. entrepreneurs and businesses as well as the information needs, seeking and use of the entrepreneurs.

#### *Nature, scope and characteristics of the Informal Sector entrepreneurs and business*

Entrepreneurs in the I.S. are spread across all ages. The largest population is youthful and therefore economically active. The majority are persons with low education. Most of those interviewed had completed primary and secondary levels of education. Though not many, college graduates are working in the I.S. just like those

who have not attended any education at all. The main occupations in the sector are, among others, food processing; metalwork; arts and crafts; construction; woodwork; social services; tailoring; technical services; garage work and transport; shoemaking, shoe shining and shoe repair; trade (rental); farm activities; and traditional birth attending. The above data represents only major clusters and reflects the position that the Sector is heterogeneous. Within most clusters/trades there are several activities; for instance, food processing includes grain milling, winemaking, food vending, processing of nut pastes, etc. The clusters attempt to aggregate occupations along the International Standards Organization classification outline and Government of Uganda listing.

The majority of entrepreneurs acquire skills through experience, although some gain them through formal training and through apprenticeship. This finding is representative of the whole country. Most entrepreneurs especially in urban areas mainly communicate in English and indigenous languages because of the diversity of indigenous languages. Fifty-six indigenous languages are spoken and recognized in Uganda (Uganda Constitution 1995). English is the official language while Kiswahili is the national language but without deep roots. Most entrepreneurs are full-time employees in their trades. In this study more than three-quarters, or 489 (81.2%), were full-time employees. A large number, 217 (36%), of them had been in business for five years or less, while 181 (30.1%) had been at it for up to ten years and a lesser number 106 (17.6%) had spent up to fifteen years. It is also regularly assumed that the I.S. absorbs people who cannot find employment elsewhere. On the contrary, this study revealed that many of them (39.5%) were schooled, 20.9% were employed in the civil service, while only 9% were employed in the private sector.

Almost two-thirds, 388 (64.5%), did not have alternative employment, while 212 (35.2%) had another business. More than half, 325 (54%), became involved in the business for income generation and the profit that they expected to gain. Just over one hundred, 102 (16.9%), indicated that they joined the sector because they were looking for gainful employment, while 77 (12.7%) were seeking a means of training and gaining experience. Fifty-nine respondents (9.8%) were absorbed

into the sector by peer influence. Those engaged full-time said they were indeed earning income from the trades they were engaged in. Five hundred and twenty-five (87.2%) experienced it as their major source of income. Most of them were motivated to join the sector by income and profit.

Contrary to other studies (Maliyankomo and Bagachwa 1990), there is significant (73.9%) recognition of the government's involvement in the sector. Government through programmes and policies and awarding of small tenders brings the government closer to the I.S.

Regarding the life span of businesses, most respondents, that is, 550 (91.4%) said that their businesses last, while only 46 (7.6%) registered a negative viewpoint. Earlier studies (Snyder 2000; Kuteesa 1998; ILO 1998) contend that informal enterprises are fragile and do not last long. They die as soon as they are formed. Findings of this study indicate a contrary view. Four hundred and sixty-one (76.5%) recognize the sector as an entrepreneurial activity for self-sustainability. Compared to the formal sector, almost half, 281 (46.7%) of the respondents said it was very important, 139 (23.1%) rated it as important, 99 (16.4%) indicated it as less important. An insignificant number 29 (4.8%) considered it as not important. Those who reason that it is important argued that there was no other place for them to go. The I.S. was the first and last place to go since they did not have better skills for other jobs, and that it was the major option for them to fight poverty and raise income for their children.

Considering business characteristics, it was found that more than half, 392 (65.1%) were sole proprietors, 111 (18.4%) were partnerships, and 63 (10.5%) were family-owned. Male-headed businesses dominate the trades. They accounted for 451 (74.9%). Of these, 399 (66.3%) were owners, 67 (11.1%) were in partnership holdings, 59 (9.8%) were employees, 49 (8.1%) were managers, and 17 (2.8%) were directors. As for infrastructure it was observed that 304 (50.5%) were accessible to transport, some operated in open air 258 (42.8%), others had permanent premises 191 (31.7%), while others 109 (18.1%) operated in semi-permanent structures, 89 (14.8%) in temporary structures and 69 (11.5%) operated under trees. In terms of utilities, 164 (27.2%) have electricity, and 112 (18.6%) have clean running water. These findings are a reliable indicator for the whole country that in

general the I.S. lacks a dependable infrastructure and social amenities.

Addressing the issue of operating licenses, this study established that two-thirds (64%) of the entrepreneurs in the I.S. of Uganda have them. This is in sharp contradiction from other sources, namely Tanzania and Nigeria (Maliyankomo and Bagachwa 1990; Fapohunda 1985) which mention that since government does not do business with the sector, it is not expected that they need licenses. But the truth of the matter is that the degree of compliance with the law depends on the geographical location of the enterprise, size of the unit and length of time it has existed.

It was essential to establish if entrepreneurs ever kept records. This is because in studies elsewhere, e.g. Swaziland and Sierra Leone (Matsebula 1996; University of Sierra Leone 1991), it is stated that entrepreneurs in the I.S., at best, kept records in their heads. Contrary to that assertion, those that kept books accounted for 343 responses (57%) and those who did not were 249 (41.4%). The types of records included purchase, sales, debtors, customers, labour, payment, banking, business activity, inventory, and business associates records. The picture that emerges is that there is some record keeping. Those who do not keep records argue that their businesses are too tiny and therefore there was no need. Their heads worked as the inventory of different records. But of course the inability to read and write could be another factor disabling them from documented record keeping.

On initial capital, entrepreneurs had limited opportunities for funds outside of their own. The vast majority (83.2%) reported having started with their own capital with limited initial support from friends or relatives. Only 3.3% obtained assistance from banks. This finding is consistent with the report of the African Development Bank (1997, 1) on the same issue.

### *Information needs and information behaviour in the Informal Sector*

In this section, the entrepreneurs' information needs and information seeking behaviours are identified and presented. Sources and channels of information used by them, methods used to acquire information, and information systems and services used are identified.

### *Information needs*

For the purpose of this study, information need is a situation that arises when an informal entrepreneur encounters a work-related problem that can be resolved through some information. As a point of departure, it was essential to establish from the entrepreneurs whether they had ever experienced or encountered a need for information for their work. The majority, 575 (95.5%) of the respondents replied in affirmative that they have experienced a need for information. Those who had experienced such need for information were then asked to narrate instances or situations of this need. Six hundred and forty-two (642) frequencies were recorded on this item. Three categories of the most important incidents were identified. These were need for training and gaining new skills (152 or 25.2%), marketing of products (144 or 23.9%) and inputs about sources or supplies and their prices (143 or 23.6%). Minor incidences included situations when seeking information on loans, pricing of products, hazards affecting fishermen on lakes, transport, competitors and government policies. Additionally, 51 (8.5%) had experienced other incidences such as the need for information on record keeping, the maintenance of tools and equipment, keeping abreast with current developments in the trades and in the country generally, how to improve quality and minimize overheads and other business opportunities and employment. In business development, the needs expressed included how to improve planning and management of businesses, how to increase output and viability and the ability to develop business ideas. And when asked to state whether they were satisfied with information they obtained, of the 174 (28.9%) that answered, the majority (over 90%) were satisfied. The others did nothing to look for information while a few others used their own experience.

### *Information seeking*

Information seeking is a process in which an individual goes about looking for information. It is a complimentary process to information need. It is a process that requires an information seeker to apply personal knowledge and skills, or what might be called "personal information infrastructures" such as a person's cognitive abilities, his/her knowledge skills in relation to the problem/

task domain, knowledge and skills in general, knowledge and skills specific to a system and knowledge and skills regarding information seeking (Marchionini 1997). According to Xie (2000, 843) information users normally employ their general cognitive skills and knowledge to (1) represent their problem, task, (2) establish a set of sub goals to fulfil the overall goals and (3) develop techniques and strategies to seek the required information. At the same time, he continues that, users' personal information infrastructures are also developed during the information-seeking process when users gain knowledge and skills to adapt to different situations and problems. Some of these strategies are searching, tracking, selecting, comparing, acquiring, consulting and trial and error. Ellis (1989, 178) used the behavioural approach and identified some other strategies such as stating or surveying, chaining, browsing, differentiating, monitoring and extraction of information.

There are already a number of models and schemes describing human information seeking behaviour, some of which are those of Ingwersen (1986, 1996, 2000). Most of these, according to Itoga (1992, 341) present a scientific explanation of the steps of human information seeking. This study considers information seeking, as a process by which the informal entrepreneurs look for information that bridges the gap between their information needs and their information sources. Among them is the context within which the need for information arises or is experienced. That is, given the entrepreneurs looking for information in the environment, what barriers may exist to either engage in information seeking or in completing the search for information successfully? Xie (2000, 841) quoting Bates, Belkin, Chang, Downs, Saracevic, Zhao, Kuhlthau and Oddy agrees with this saying that people engage in multiple types of information seeking strategies.

Since the entrepreneurs said they had experienced information needs, they were asked how they sought the information. Over 2,000 answers were received. Findings show that entrepreneurs used two major ways, listening and talking to people and contacting those who knew, with a rating of 354 (59%) each. This is followed by a reliance on personal experience (332 or 55%), asking a friend/relative/working neighbour (297 or 49%) and visiting and asking customers (197 or 33%) in that order. Listening to radio/TV (146 or

24%), using social networks (126 or 21%), asking a supervisor (115 or 19%), reading newspapers, manuals, or books (96 or 16%), inquiring from educated people in the area (62 or 16%) were other fairly important methods. Among the lowest used methods were asking extension agents (52 or 9%), asking role models in the area (49 or 8%), seeking assistance from area councillors (29 or 5%), asking and listening to politicians (17 or 3%), and visiting a library nearest to me (10 or 2%).

These findings show that the most popular methods of seeking information by the entrepreneurs are through people who are close at hand. These are informal and oral communications in nature. The reading of newspapers, manuals or books secured an insignificant score (96 or 16%). It is therefore evident that use of formal channels and modern methods of information transfer play an insignificant role, possibly because of illiteracy and inappropriateness of information packaging.

### *Sources of information*

The question soliciting information on sources received more than 2,000 responses. This is an indication that of the 602 respondents, each one of them had at least four sources of information. The sources of information indicate that word of mouth (539 or 89%), personal experience (439 or 73%), friends, relatives, neighbours (79 or 3%), ranked highest while radio/TV (231 or 38%), work supervisor (118 or 20%), print media such as newspapers and newsletters (118 or 20%), workshops and seminars (111 or 18%), local councils (83 or 14%), area politicians including opinion leaders (66 or 11%), business associates and business promotion centres (47 or 8%), orientation tours (43 or 7%), educational institutions (36 or 6%), churches, mosques, meetings (35 or 6%), NGOs (24 or 4%), sign posts (21 or 3%), cultural ceremonies (20 or 3%), libraries (17 or 3%) and other (38 or 6%) ranked low.

Entrepreneurs largely depend on their immediate surroundings as a first stop for information. For example, word of mouth, use of personal experience and friends, relatives and neighbours dominated the answers. The public library is among those that scored lowest. It is deduced that information is mostly gotten from within the environment where the business is located.

How information is received showed the formats in which it is provided. There are similarities among the information sources and seeking habits as well as the close environment trends in information seeking and sourcing. Not surprisingly, almost half (276 or 45.8%) of the respondents received their information directly verbally. Others accessed it through radio and television broadcasts (67 or 11%), written and printed formats (33 or 5.5%) while 25 (4%) obtained it through seminars and workshops again appear to be an oral/verbal method. It is deduced that informal methods of receiving information are the most prominent for the I.S. Radio broadcasts are much popular than television and for the obvious reasons that most of Uganda is rural without electricity or solar power to run television sets. Even then poverty level cannot allow a majority to own televisions.

Regarding the regularity of the need for particular information, respondents indicated the topics they seek information about regularly and those they seek information about only occasionally. Among those identified were marketing and pricing (232 or 38.5%), sources of inputs or supplies (200 or 33%), and training (163 or 27%). Others were loans and grants (33 or 5%), health issues (18 or 3%) and product quality control (12 or 2%), government policies (6 or 0.9%), security (5 or 0.8%) and transport (4 or 0.6%). Expectedly, most respondents (409 or 68%) did not know about public libraries; among those who knew, 120 (20%), of them had almost never used one. However, 24 (14%) had used libraries regularly while another 34 (5.6%) used them occasionally. The few, 24 (14%), who use libraries regularly sought information on training, addresses of places to get inputs and modern production methods among the others.

### *Role of information*

This study explored the uses to which information is put once it is acquired and established from the entrepreneurs the role information plays in their activities. It was most heartening to establish that almost all respondents, 554 (92%), agreed that information has a role to play. It helps them make rational decisions and take appropriate actions. To some of them it increased the capacity to see things more widely and become more fo-

cused. Those who said information does not help (6.8%), it can be assumed, are confronted with ignorance of information.

As far as the use of information is concerned, 92% found information valuable. This was expressed by the following factors: need for inputs, markets and training. This means activities like looking for initial capital, taking decisions on the type of business to conduct, how to start a business, how and where to look for inputs, the use of inputs, and taking decisions on what to produce, are expression of ways to use information. This is in much the same way as they were concerned about quantity and quality, and how and where to sell, prices, price and business trends and how to deal with customers and cope with opportunities, challenges and threats as they arose. Furthermore, information helped them in understanding the day-to-day current affairs including understanding government regulations, acquiring skills and having good relations with people.

#### *Contribution of information to problem solving*

If information was found useful, it was important to determine its contribution to the sector. These findings summarize those contributions. Entrepreneurs stated that as a result of wise information use, they were able to acquire the skills they wanted (139 or 23%), and some of them became self-reliant (88 or 15%). Ability to obtain inputs (87 or 14%), improved efficiency and effectiveness (82 or 13%), obtaining better markets (67 or 11%), managing to sustain oneself (62 or 10%), being able to pay tax more easily (26 or 4%), getting employed (9 or 2%), enjoying improved health (8 or 2%) and becoming more enlightened (6 or 1%) were some of the dividends cited as the results of the wise use of information.

As shown, these findings reveal that the appropriate use of information resulted in several gains. It was observed that entrepreneurs were able to access training opportunities and access loans. They were also able to produce marketable goods and improve customer relations, and they learned and met customer needs. This also increased their ability to sell their products at competitive prices. Some that were engaged in better fishing practices reduced post-harvest losses. This gave them the opportunity to plan wisely within available funds and time, such that from then

on, things were done in a much better way, as mistakes and errors were fewer. There were also examples of those who had expanded their business.

#### *Information use and its impact*

The value and impact of information use refers to the new conditions that are established after information has been used. Putting this in context, Menou (1998, 11) uses the metaphor of a fisherman. He narrates a story of someone that was shown how to catch a fish and was lucky enough to catch it. But catching a fish the first time does not in itself prove much about the value or impact of his knowledge of fishing. But that this person knows from now on how to catch fish does. Using the same analogy to an information user, by the very fact that someone was shown where information is and he/she was lucky to get it, does not prove much about his knowledge of information seeking. It could have been mere luck or securing of information by serendipity. But that this person from now on is capable and able to access and use information productively, then the information he/she gets is clear proof of the value and impact of information to the individual. By "impact" is meant the changes that take place in an individual as brought on by the use of information in the ability of people to satisfy their needs. This is by and large an enhanced state of knowledge.

Using the above example to evaluate information use impact, respondents were asked for the effects information made to them and their businesses. An open-ended question was used for this purpose. The benefits of information use are: business improved or expanded (129 or 21%), easy co-ordination of activities and group formation (96 or 16%), improvement in skills (69 or 11%), business sustained (63 or 10%), accessed new and better markets (59 or 10%), improved living standards (58 or 9%), increased sales and profits (56 or 9%), new and better opportunities (29 or 6%), popularity and publicity (22 or 4%), meeting tax obligations on time (15 or 2%), and increased motivation (14 or 2%).

Growth means a state, at which business starts, stabilizes and remains the same all time or faces cyclical changes without collapsing. Development goes beyond growth. It means a stage is reached

where benefits and trends consistently show tangible output. Confidence levels show the positive side of business. In this study, an open-ended question was asked on the impact of information use. Information is useful in that it led, among others, to long term skills development (194 or 32.1%), brought about business improvement (110 or 18.3%), helped in marketing (103 or 17.1%), created awareness of government policies (59 or 9.8%), assisted in locating inputs (42 or 7%), and improved domestic income and reinforced performance behaviour (21 or 3.5%).

### *Problems entrepreneurs face in accessing information*

Entrepreneurs were asked whether at any working time they had ever experienced difficulties in getting information for their activities. This too was a closed-ended question where the respondents were to choose 'yes', 'sometimes' 'uncertain' or 'never'. An overwhelming majority 528 (87.7%) replied in the affirmative. Of the 87.7% who experienced difficulties, 301 (57%) of them said 'Yes,' they felt the difficulties; and 227 (43%) felt the difficulties, sometimes. On how often these difficulties were felt 435 (72.5%) of them felt it sometimes and only 69 (11.5%) felt them always. Twenty-two respondents (3.6%) were uncertain. This is right because a normal person cannot have an active feeling for something all the time, otherwise there will not be any time for doing other things. It shows that entrepreneurs, however lowly educated they are, are able to differentiate cognitively the extents of their information behaviour. A summary of difficulties faced in getting information included the entrepreneurs inability to get the required information, absence of a specific place to get the required information, taking a lot of time to get correct information and outright ignorance of information facilities. Entrepreneurs felt that sometimes the information they get is unreliable, that people with information conceal it, that they have a lack of knowledge where to get information and that they have no time to look for information. Others expressed that information is available in languages they do not know, and most information they needed is written and they are illiterate.

The difficulties expressed border on timeless, relevance, location, reliability, accessibility and

marketing of information. It also touches on personal weaknesses, weaknesses among information providers and weaknesses in sources and services and the information infrastructure in the country. It should be pointed out that being illiterate, as mentioned, does not mean inability to appreciate information. It is likely that these entrepreneurs understood information to be the type that is written or that which is in print only.

The study sought to find out what they thought would happen if there were a complete lack of information. The aim was to test the entrepreneurs' power of recall, which is essential in information behaviour. It was also to gather entrepreneurs' experiences and views to see if these worked negatively against their performance. For example entrepreneurs usually experienced difficulty in securing the right tools and inputs, and they would complain that spares they bought were more expensive than they should have been. They bought fake inputs from the market and so on. As a result of this question, it was found out that lack of information caused loss of competitiveness and lowered business progress. Difficulties in marketing, low sales/profits and some businesses collapsing sooner rather than later and in some instances poor quality of products being produced were attributed to lack of information.

### *Opinions of entrepreneurs to solve the information gap*

In concluding, it was important to look into the future. Suggestions were sought on how to fill the information gaps and proposals on how to address these gaps. It is the view of entrepreneurs that training seminars and workshops should be regularly organized for them. Using that channel they will benefit more from information meant specifically for them. They were also of the view that for information providers to target them meaningfully, they should use radio and television programs and at the right time. Currently there are 77 FM radio stations in the country but the complaint against them is that they do not adequately address most peoples' information needs. Encouraging group formation was a recommendation they thought would make it easy for information providers to come to talk to them in groups. Opening of an information centre and pro-

viding cheaper telephone services were clearly the most urgent needs.

It can be deduced that entrepreneurs are very keen on receiving training. Their interest was more in extension services. They preferred demonstration services, workshops and seminars as the types of training to be conducted. They preferred verbal information over radio and television information, and they also need transport services to be improved.

Equally important is the issue of packaging information. This entails the form in which information is presented. Wrong packaging can result in information non-use. Entrepreneurs needed information to be presented to them in factual form (364 or 60%), pieces of advice (325 or 54%), while 307 (51%) expressed the need for information to be provided in the form of technical details. The other ways mentioned were in the form of news 162 (27%) and in the form of opinions (99 or 16.4%). The general opinion is that information that entrepreneurs need should be as complete as possible at the time of delivery. This is why their needs are for factual and complete in details. Information should be brought in the form of pieces of advice. This saves on time, costs and other complications of looking for more information elsewhere. It would also solve weaknesses of information seeking among entrepreneurs.

Regarding the coverage and presentation, there was agreement from 395 (65.6%) that it should be exhaustive while 163 (27%) stated that information should be restricted and be limited to only what is needed. There were 149 (24.7%) who stated that information should be disseminated on a selective basis. In short, the view was that information should be exhaustive and limited to use but should be selective or presented on a case-by-case basis. It is explained here that when entrepreneurs choose information to be exhaustive or restricted, it means only that information that can empower them to do their job and tasks efficiently and effectively.

### *Presentation of information*

Comments on how information should be delivered revealed that 474 (78.7%) preferred that information be delivered foremost orally. This was followed by radio and television preference by 287 (47.6%). The printed method came third

with a rating of 234 (38.8%). The use of print format in information provision is inextricably bound with literacy skills. The delivery of information in an illustrated manner was also strongly supported by 137 (22.7%).

### *Services required*

An information system developed or adopted must meet the needs of the people to be served. A closed-ended question with seventeen options was given from which respondents could select those deemed essential or useful. The findings show clearly that a question-and-answer service topped the list with 410 (68%). This was followed by a group discussion service (309 or 51%), exposure visits (276 or 49%), demonstration services (239 or 40%) and training on information access and use (194 or 32%). These then are the most expected and preferred forms of services to be introduced first. As can be deduced from the pattern, there is no reading involved directly in these methods. Next on their list were information brokerage, trade information exchange service, referral information service, lending service, public shows and packaging of information. Low on the tally sheet is online, film and photocopy services, all of which depend on technology for information delivery.

### *Responsibility for introducing an information system*

The intention was to roughly map out ideas on the kind of information systems that I.S. entrepreneurs feel could best handle their information needs. Three proposals were anticipated. The first one uses an existing information system, the second requires building an entirely new system, and the third is a combination of both. The goal was for a system that meets everyone's needs.

Respondents were given a chance to express their views regarding which organization they thought would best handle their information needs and introduce an information system. As it occurred, many alternatives were proposed. A summary revealed that their two options were the government and NGOs. Within government, there were several proposals including ministries, government employees up to the grassroots or the lowest administrative level. The overriding

factor influencing the choice was sustainability. They argued that although the government is always slow in implementing projects, its presence was guaranteed. It is perpetual.

On the other hand, those who preferred NGOs reasoned that NGOs have money. These, they believed, have a lot of money that could see a project off the ground very quickly. But then it was observed that NGOs are prone to changes in their programs according to the interest of funding agencies and circumstances. In the end they recommended that government shoulder the responsibility to establish, manage and maintain the information centre in every district. This boils down to improving community information services. The law decentralizing public libraries was enacted in 1997. Areas without them will be considered when funds become available.

Management of the proposed information system was also a significant aspect of inquiry. It was a planning domain of interest. The findings were also varied but centred on a committee and individuals. But what was picked up from 572 (95%) of the respondents is that professionals who are motivated and supported should be the ones to run it even if it were an association, a committee or government department in charge of it. The choice for a professional was based on the understanding that such a person would know how to get, filter and disseminate information appropriately. The remaining 30 (5%) suggested that a radio station would manage it well. What this translated into was that respondents are very careful to pinpoint exactly that people knowledgeable in information management are essential and therefore need to be empowered to do so.

The preferred information system was another stimulating area of concern to see how people feel about things that affect them. It came out very clearly that people are aware of what they want. A summary of findings strongly suggests that each trade wanted its own type of information system. This boiled down to so many information systems. But on further inquiry it was found out that one system could suffice. What was needed was the establishment of an information system in every district that takes into account all I.S. activities. Each trade would be a major subject area with subdivisions in it. They further suggested that the system should be in a position to work together with other in-

formation systems like the radio and television and other information centres in the country and abroad. The objective idea was that through this way quality information would be gained and information sharing would be enhanced.

### *Discussions and conclusions*

The findings show that the I.S. in Uganda, which has ancient economic roots, is served by a diversity of information systems and services comprising both an informal, indigenous Afro-centric component as well as a modern, Euro-centric formal element. The sector employs both adults and children who, generally, earn low wages from the business activities. While entrepreneurs largely have only a basic education, well-educated people such as university graduates also serve the system. Working hours are flexible and depend on the type of activity. Involvement in the sector is basically motivated by personal survival, possibilities for obtaining training, availability of markets for products and services and the acquisition of specific skills. The sector offers over 800,000 jobs and employs 1.5 million people in rural as well as urban areas – yet there is little division of labour and organisation of production.

While most of the businesses are unregistered, record keeping is prevalent. Personal capital is mostly relied on for starting up businesses. Products tend to be inferior and there is limited evidence to suggest that cultural beliefs have any influence on the sector's activities or performance.

Information needs within the sector are determined contextually and pragmatically. Information is generally required with regard to training and skills, markets and marketing techniques, cheaper sources of raw materials and supplies, finance, tools and equipment, business management and development, knowledge of production processes, advocacy and lobby skills, new areas of investment, record keeping, quality improvement and recognition by government.

An indication of the need for more comprehensive, permanent sources of information precipitate inquiries concerning the establishment of an information centre. Information-seeking is largely an informal activity, while reading and the use of libraries for accessing information are almost non-existent due to illiteracy including information

illiteracy, very few or no libraries, irrelevant content, inaccessibility due to form of information presentation, inadequate infrastructure and a poor reading culture among this community. There is no evidence that radio, considered to be popular among the entrepreneurs, is maximally used for information accessibility. This is partly due to bad timing of broadcasts, the high costs of maintenance, traditions dictating who should access broadcasts and irrelevant content for entrepreneurs.

Information is used in marketing, location of raw materials and supplies, pricing products and services, improving skills, decision-making, general enlightenment, promoting self-reliance, familiarization with current affairs (including government regulations) and in dealing with and relating to other people. The impact of information usage is judged by business improvement, co-ordination of workers and activities, upgrading of skills, improved opportunities and living standards and increased sales and profits, among others.

Factors that impact negatively on accessibility of information from an entrepreneur's point of view include the inability to obtain the required information, lack of knowledge of specific locations where information can be obtained, cost of information, the length of time taken to acquire the required information, limited marketing and promotion of information products and services to the entrepreneur, apathy towards information, language barriers and illiteracy. While the few available public libraries are irrelevant to this market segment, the existing information services provided by the government and non-governmental organizations and associations are under-utilised. This is largely due to poor infrastructure, including the telephone system throughout the country, bad timing of broadcasting radio programs, low priority given to information in budgets, the publication of newspapers in only a few local languages and poor marketing of information services.

It is observed that information could be supplied more effectively to the I.S. if illiteracy could be reduced significantly or if it could be eliminated entirely. This could be achieved through increased basic and adult education activities and programs by means of the re-packaging information. Creating and supporting special units with-

in and outside the government domain to tackle the task could facilitate such a goal. Radio broadcasts could be reviewed for effectiveness, while the role of the public library in society could be redefined. This, in turn, would call on increased research by the various trades into the specific types of information needed by the entrepreneurs and by wide dissemination of the results.

Government should be urged to establish an information centre and to provide an effective service for entrepreneurs. Suggestions on how this can be achieved at both policy level and system and services level could be based on a theoretical model suggested. For example, it is suggested that by intensifying the publication of information in other local languages, channels of information dissemination could be increased. In addition, it is suggested that the Government should work hand in hand with the private sector and NGOs to build capacity for provision of information services to the I.S.

The popularity of oral-based information services that are also easily available and accessible to the entrepreneur is not unique to this information consumer category alone. Modern push-and-pull technologies increasingly favour and exploit close proximity in the environment for the delivery of especially audio-visual information products and services. This trend also needs to be exploited to the advantage of the I. S. entrepreneur. It is furthermore suggested that it would be worthwhile to explore the role that indigenous knowledge systems could play in order to enhance information diffusion among the I.S. entrepreneurs.

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