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Records management practice in support of governance in the county governments of Kenya, a case of Nyamira County

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to establish the records management practice, in support of governance in Nyamira County. The objectives were to determine the types of records managed in Nyamira County, to establish the contribution of records management in the running of Nyamira County, to determine the adoption of records management policies in Nyamira County and to assess strategies that will lead to sound records management in Nyamira County.

Design/methodology/approach – The sample population comprised 27 respondents who were drawn from different categories of staff through census sampling as follows: 4 records officers, 3 record clerks, 10 chief officers and 10 secretaries. The study used a qualitative research approach where interview schedules and observation were used for data collection.

Findings – It was established that Nyamira County generated various types of records including policy related records, financial records and auditing records. It was submitted that records management is essential in support of governance as it forms a basis for equity in resource distribution, hence fostering confidence among the public, which results in good will from the people on County government projects. The study noted various challenges including inadequately trained staff on records management, lack of records disposal and retention schedules, inadequate equipment and space and inadequate policies and standards.

Originality/value – The study concluded that poor records management practiced in Nyamira County was a great hindrance to good governance and recommended that county governments should formulate and implement records management policies, standards and guidelines and provide adequate budgetary allocations to ensure that the records management practice that is in place supports governance.

Keywords Governance, Records management, Records practice

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

ISO (15489:2015) emphasizes the importance of records management to governance, although records management practice has not received proper support in many developing countries (World Bank, 2010). County governments generate records in the process of conducting business, and for these records to support county government functions, they should be systematically maintained and repositioned. Proper records management therefore underscores the very essence of governance, whereas poor records management is a hindrance to governance. Records management practice is a key support for efficient and effective organizational operations (World Bank, 2010). In whichever endeavor, planning and strategizing are first put down on record before the actual implementation takes place. To ensure regional balancing in the distribution of county resources, records must be consulted to provide information on population distribution, poverty indexes and social economic practices among others.
Records aid in showing past mistakes and failures, provide traces on the activities and behaviors, leading to given losses and hence helping managers look back in retrospect, and evaluate the present while planning for the future in such a way that the past mistakes are not repeated besides replicating the routes of past successes (Goodman, 2004). On the other hand, poor records management as argued by ARMA International (2013) has led to corrupt practices, lack of accountability and poor governance structures. Neglected records in many countries have become a major barrier to development.

Further, Mnjama (2002) opines that records and information play a critical role in fighting corruption: they protect citizen’s rights in ensuring transparency, accountability and governance and hence sustainable economic development. In spite of their significance, studies by Burns and Grove (2003) suggest that records management in Africa has not been practiced with the seriousness it deserves. Neglected records have become a major barrier to governance as they fail to support transparency, accountability and the rule of the law owing to their disorganized state. Owing to this, a study was necessary to establish the records management practice in Nyamira County and the extent to which it is supporting or not supporting governance to come up with strategies of improving the records management practice.

1.1 Nyamira County
Nyamira County is in the former Nyanza Province of Kenya, situated about 40 miles from Lake Victoria. It was formerly a part of Kisii County when Kisii County was a district. The county has a population of 598,252 (2009 Census). Its capital and largest town is known as Nyamira, with an urban population of around 41,668 (2009 Census).

According to the then, Nyamira District Strategic Plan for Sustainable Development, Nyamira people are classified as a primarily agricultural. Majority of the people of this community practice small-scale farming. They depend upon the government to inform them on weather patterns, market opportunities and modern farming methods. Nyamira County is divided into four sub-counties, namely, Borabu, Nyamira, Manga and Masaba North. The county has the following constituencies: Borabu, KitutuMasaba, North Mugirango and West Mugirango.

2. Literature review
2.1 Records
According to the International Organization for Standardization (2015, ISO 15489), a record is information created, received and maintained as evidence by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business. This definition agrees with that of Duranti (2010), who asserts that a record is a reliable and complete document that is able to convey information, capable of being used in a transaction and of reaching the purposes for which they have been produced.

While organizations are conducting their day-to-day business activities focused on their goals and objectives, records are generated as a by-product. These records offer to trace organizational involvements in every aspect. It is on such records that organizations lay proof of their activities for the purposes of accountability. Records therefore are information materials regardless of their format with structure, content and context that offers evidence of business transactions and can be relied upon in cases of litigation (World Bank, 2010).

2.2 Records management
Records management is a field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposal of records including processes for
capturing and maintaining evidence of and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records, ISO 15489-1 (2015).

Records management is a systematic control of an organization’s records, throughout their life cycle, to meet operational business needs, statutory, fiscal requirements and community expectations (Harries, 2009). Records management involves organization’s broader activities that are associated with the discipline or field known as Governance Risk and Compliance (“GRC”) and is primarily concerned with the evidence of an organization’s activities and the reduction or mitigation of risk that may be associated with such evidence (Tarantino, 2008).

2.3 Records management and governance
Goodman (2004) argues that all elements for effective development, namely, governance, effective and accountable financial systems, fair judicial system and enforceable civil rights, are dependent upon an effective records management infrastructure. Without a proper records management infrastructure, institutions will have no ability to use the experience of the past for guidance.

Chibambo (2003) contends that records document the decisions and activities of governments and private institutions and serve as a standard through which future activities and decisions are measured. Without records, there can be neither rule of law nor accountability. Without good records, officials are forced to take decisions on an ad hoc basis without the benefit of an institutional memory. Fraud cannot be proven, meaningful audits cannot be carried out and government actions are not open to review.

Popoola (2007) reasons that in providing services to its citizens, a government needs hospital records, school records and environmental protection monitoring records. In documenting its relationship with other countries, a government needs foreign relations and international obligations, treaties, correspondence with national and international bodies and loan agreements.

Without adequate records, the effectiveness of development projects must suffer. Properly managed records ensure that government officers base their decisions on accurately captured information.

Ngoepe (2008) asserts that inadequacy of sound records management practices in government institutions is a hindrance to governance. It may not be practical to ensure proper and fair county planning without consulting records. Good sustainable governance always begins with better records management practices that guard against corruption, mismanagement of finances and bribery. Adequately available recorded information is the basis that government departments make informed decisions.

McLeod and Childs (2007) opine that poor recordkeeping attracts corruption like flies to a carcass. Where there are no records and where recordkeeping systems are not working, governance becomes a dream. All ingredients of governance and sustainable development depend upon an effective records management system. Without a records management infrastructure in place, governments and organizations are incapable of effectively managing their current operations and are unable to use the experience of the past for guidance. Further, she argues that proper records management minimizes operational costs, guards against material and information duplication and promotes savings in terms of space and time.

In the view of Wamukoya (2007), properly managed records are the basis upon which corporate entities are able to defend their decisions and actions. Records are critical in policy formulation, implementation and follow-ups. They help in all matters of organizational planning, monitoring and evaluations. Without records, organizations will not know where
they have come from to mark a basis of chanting forward. Keeping track of actions therefore enables governments to make proper decisions, which in turn promote public service delivery.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive-survey research design as the participants answered questions through interviews and the researcher described the responses given. A qualitative research approach was used as the researcher focused on a specific issue ‘the management of records’.

The study was conducted at Nyamira County Government. Nyamira County was previously known as North Kisii district in the former Nyanza Province.

The persons selected for the interviews were key decision-makers in the management and use of records, and they include four records management officers, three records management clerks, ten county officers and ten secretaries to the county officers. The study used both purposive and census sampling techniques. Purposive sampling technique is a technique in which a researcher hand picks subjects to participate in the study based on identified variables under consideration (Mugo, 2003), whereas census method involves interviewing all members of a given population (Zina, 2004). Census sampling method was used to identify the respondents.

The records management officers were interviewed because they are responsible for the control, maintenance, preservation and care of records, as well as ensuring that records’ authenticity is upheld. Records clerks are responsible for daily filing of correspondence, retrieval and distribution of files to appropriate action officers.

These officers were useful to providing information related to creation, receipt maintenance, storage and use of records. County officers were selected based on their central role of county governance that is closely associated with records. Secretaries gave information as pertaining to information capture which involves typing correspondence, minutes of meetings and other documents such as duty allocation records.

The study was guided by the following questions:

- Which types of records are available in Nyamira County?
- How has records management contributed to the running of Nyamira County Government?
- Which records management policies are adopted in Nyamira County?
- What strategies will lead to proper records management in Nyamira County?

3.1 Response rate

Respondents for this study were drawn from Nyamira County Government. A total of 19 (70 per cent) respondents were interviewed. They comprised of four record officers, three record clerks, six county chief officers and six secretaries. Four sampled county officers and four secretaries were not interviewed as they were outside work station during the interview period.

4. Data analysis

4.1 Types of records managed in Nyamira County

The first objective of the study sought to determine the types of records that are managed in Nyamira County, especially those likely to influence governance.
The findings indicated that record officers, chief officers and secretaries managed policy records, minutes of meetings, financial records and planning records. Other prominent records in Nyamira County were educational syllabuses, government circulars and performance contracting records that are relied upon by the public service in evaluating employee’s competence, efficiency and effectiveness.

Policy records are important in governing any one given institution as they inform on the procedures and undertakings in the process of achieving the objectives of the parent organization. Governance is promoted by consultative meetings which give birth to various minutes. It is through the minutes that a history of previous agreements can be captured, thus forming a basis of decision-making. Planning records support governance as they offer a layout of what the government intends to do and how.

Record officers were asked to identify the records in their custody that support governance.

The above-mentioned records include policy-related records, minutes of previous meetings, records related to planning and development, financial records and auditing records. Responding on the same, chief officers were asked to identify the records that they require to perform governance-related activities in their offices. A number of records were identified, including medical records, financial records, policy records, minutes of departmental meetings, educational syllabuses, national government circulars, executive minutes, records on climate and weather, records on food security, records on physical planning, geographical maps and auditing records.

Secretaries uniquely identified performance contracting records, a few records touching on personnel and correspondences; it was observed that such records were kept out of public scrutiny likely because of their presumed sensitivity. This may have been the reason as to why they were not common with other groups of respondents who were asked the same question.

Related to the types of records, records officers were probed to explain the nature of records used for governance. In response, they observed that such records should be accurate, reliable, authentic, relevant and timely; they include those that are financial, planning and auditing in nature.

Further, records officers were required to identify the records management systems that they have adapted to organizing records for the support of governance. It was submitted too that the records management unit still embraces the manual system of records management with alphabetical arrangement. It was observed that records management at the county Government of Nyamira is manual with an exception of a few electronic files maintained at decentralized locations.

The findings from the study showed that the chief officer’s office required sufficient equipment, adequate staff and space. This was necessary to ensure that the office manages records effectively, efficiently and economically. They explained that if they had sufficient financial allocations, they will employ more records staff and adequately educate the existing ones through seminars and workshops. The respondents too indicated that with more financial allocations, they would purchase modern equipment and automate their records to foster efficiency and effectiveness.

Records clerks were asked if they have a filing index in place, and their response was an emphatic yes. They were further interrogated on the procedure of requesting for a file from their department. Their response was that upon requesting for any file from the records office, it is mandatory that the requesting officer fills up the delivery or collecting book, then signs against his/her name for the purposes of follow ups and recalls. The group was asked to identify the offices that frequently request files from the records office, and they were able
to positively identify the office of the county secretary, all county ministries and the public service commission, which implies that the records office is central in managing county records.

In a bid to get more information from the records clerks, the study sought to know the length of time that other departments stay with their records. Like the record officers who were asked this question, they submitted that depending on use, records can be returned within the range from one day to a month. Respondents submitted that there were times that records stayed long before action. This were the times when action officers outside their normal work station. With the exceptions of such, records were worked upon at a timely period.

Response from the record clerks on the types of records managed in Nyamira County was not sought as it was considered to be a replication of what the record officers presented; hence, the researcher presented to them a range of different questions that were meant to inform the study. The study sought to find out from the record clerks if there exist any guidelines and procedures followed in handling records. The responses were that records were handled under clear cut guidelines and procedures. This view was in agreement with the view of the record officers who explained that despite the fact that they did not have clear cut policies on records management, they had proper guidelines and procedures for records management.

When questioned on the procedures of tracking policy files, they submitted that they first check on their delivery books to enable them identify the officer who last requested for the file then make follow ups. The findings showed that respondents managed varied types of records as submitted by record officers and secretaries who were particularly responding to the same question. They identified their role as included but not limited to capture, filing, preservation and retrieval for various actions. From their response, records management practice was not fully embraced as many of the information materials were in shambles, a view that basically agreed with Charman (2002), who asserts that records management practice in Africa is not been fully enforced.

4.2 Contribution of records management in the running of Nyamira Country

To find out how records management activities can enhance the achievements of county government objectives, respondents were asked various questions: Respondent chief officers were required to explain the term governance from their points of view. Respondents submitted that governance entails coming up with policies that are geared toward managing territories or organizations through exercise of authority or power.

Regarding the same, record officers were required to define governance. Their definition that touched on exercise of power over a territory or organization slightly differed from that of chief officers, whose view was that governance is the management of records in terms of providing guidance to the records staff, putting in place proper systems for records management and providing advisory information to all departments in regard to proper records management. The definitions brought about aspects of agreement, especially by pointing out that governance is leading with an intention of achieving a given goal or objective.

Chief officers were further required to mention among their responsibilities, those that are governance-related. They submitted that their responsibilities included policy formulation and implementation, strategic plan implementation, staff administration and training. Promotion of national values and principles was cited as governance-related responsibilities, although there was a view that in an indirect manner, all county officers
perform governance-related responsibilities hence were the best placed to inform on the extent that records management contributes to the running of counties.

Asked to identify their roles that are governance-related, record officers, unlike the chief officers, submitted that their roles were centered on records management and included training and supervisory roles to the records staff, management of record budgets and resources, creation and maintenance of records disposal schedules maintenance and care of records and policy formulation. Despite the difference in roles, it is through the records management roles that recorded information is available for use by the county officers whose responsibilities are geared toward county governance.

Chief officers were further asked to name the groups of people that benefit from governance related activities from their offices. The respondents observed that all departments under the county government are interdependent; hence, governance activities of one department can benefit others depending on an issue at hand. By extension, the public was another group that too benefits from the governance related activities.

Chief officers were probed to explain how records management influence governance; they observed that county government decisions are based on information that is contained in records, hence proper records management enhance effectiveness and efficiency in governance. Proper records management was seen as a tool to foster trust and good will from the public as it encourages accountability and transparency necessary for effective governance.

Responding to the same question, record officers were in agreement that it is through proper, reliable, accountable, transparent and authentic records that positive decisions on county governance can be informed. Both the two cadres observed that the importance of proper records on decision-making would never be overemphasized as all actions in the county government depends on information that is held in records.

From the findings, the study observed that records have a great influence on the way the County Government of Nyamira executes its services. Properly managed records provide a basis for equity in resource distributions, hence fostering confidence among the public, which results into good will from the people on county government projects, hence smooth governance. Through proper records of statistics, the county is able to ensure proper planning for the future of its subjects in terms of creation of employment, food security, provision of education, provision of health services, improving infrastructure and provision of water.

The findings concur with the view of Musembi (2005) that there exists a close relationship between governance and record keeping. Well-managed records are tools for governance; they facilitate the achievements of transparency and accountability in public administration. Poorly managed records directly undermine any effort to achieve governance. The significance of these findings is that governance cannot be realized in an environment where records are poorly managed. Poorly managed records are a recipe for delayed decisions or at times poor decisions. It is on this ground that records should be well managed to enhance governance.

4.3 Adoption of records management policies in Nyamira County

This objective sought to find out if the County Government of Nyamira had policies in place for managing records. Record officers and record clerks were asked to reveal policies that are in place for the support of governance. Their submissions were that there are no records management policies in place, although records management in the County of Nyamira does not run on a policy vacuum as there existed office guidelines and procedures on governing the management of records.
Despite the fact that chief officers were in agreement with record officers and record clerks that there are no clear-cut policies in place for records management, they submitted that they have complied with the ISO standards which has provided international guidelines on records management. The study established that records regulatory bodies such as International Organization Standard (ISO, 15489:2015) were in place and helped greatly in laying standards for records management. It was found out too that despite the fact that these standards were helpful in records management, they were not fully embraced hence several inconsistencies were revealed.

Similarly secretaries indicated that they were guided by ISO in management of records at their custody. These respondents positively identified ISO standards, a response that was in agreement with their boss chief officers who attested that they have made good progress in complying with the ISO standards and that the Nyamira County is ISO certified. The study revealed that ISO officers dwelt in county officer’s offices than other areas, a reason as to why the records officers did not remember to single it out as a standard they embrace in records management.

The study found out that some clauses, especially that of employing qualified records managers and centralizing records management, were disregarded, hence irregularities in records management. The study revealed that the problems facing records management in Nyamira County were policy-related; hence, formulating proper records management policies is a necessity.

These findings fall in line with the literature reviewed; ISO 15489-1:2001 observed that the aim of the Records Management Policy is to ensure that complete and accurate records of all activities and issues of state records are created.

ISO15489-1:2001 further contended that records should be managed and retained or disposed in accordance with relevant legislation. This will enable organizational records to achieve information accessibility and improvement. It will also meet its obligations for accountability while ensuring that it protects the rights and interests of all parties like the government, the organization, organization’s staff, clients and the community.

4.4 Records management improvement strategies

The fourth objective sought to assess strategies to improving records management. A summary of the findings is tabulated in Table I.

The findings of the study revealed that Nyamira County has a decentralized system of records management and although there was a central authority, all offices jealously guarded those records they felt sensitive. Despite the fact that this records management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies toward improvement of records management in Nyamira county</th>
<th>Record officers</th>
<th>Chief officers</th>
<th>Secretaries</th>
<th>Record clerks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enact and comply with records management policies</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ qualified records management staff</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure adequate budgets to address shortages in equipment and space</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralize records management</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educate employees on the need for proper records management</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a proper records management program in place</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digitize records to improve on efficiency and use</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.
Records management improvement strategies in Nyamira
strategy ensured that records are accessible promptly for action, the challenges of inadequacy in equipment, space and staff were noted.

From the findings of Table I, respondents were in agreement that enactment and compliance of records management policies and adequate budgetary allocations were key strategies that can be embraced to improve records management in Nyamira County. This view was so because policies guide records management procedures, and their absence therefore could mean the processes are compromised, hence poorly managed records. Most records management activities are dependent on finances; hence, the respondents felt that with proper facilitation, records could be managed effectively and efficiently.

Training employees on records management skills, employing qualified records management staff, centralizing records management and digitizing records management were the second most proposed strategies that the respondents recommended to foster proper records management in Nyamira County. Records officers uniquely proposed that employees in all departments should be trained on proper records management, and that there should be a proper records management program in place to support records management practice in the county. This response was unique because it is a technical view held by records managers, hence was not expected from other respondents.

To investigate the strategies that can be used to improve records management in Nyamira County, two questions were particularly presented to the record officers and record clerks. The first question required the respondents to reveal the challenges they experience while using records. The respondents submitted that among others they face the following challenges: lack of policies which could be touching on records management procedures, training, remuneration and motivation, lack of commitment by top management, lack of guidance on how to manage records, insufficient funds, over accumulation of records and lack of disposition schedules.

Similarly, secretaries identified lack of disposal and retention schedules, inadequate equipment and space, inadequate policies and standards, lack of training and knowhow in records management and the challenges related to scattered records all over the county departments. Chief officers were required to identify the challenges they encounter in records management. Among others, they submitted that they lacked qualified staff, the space within county departments was inadequate for records management, they lacked equipment for records management, challenges of preservation and repair to deteriorating records and they lacked trust with the central records unit and hence opted to manage records by themselves within their departments.

Probed further on the solution to these challenges, the respondents were of the opinion that there should be clear-cut policies on records management that can promote records security as the leakages of confidential information or alterations of part of the information was the major reason as to why they opted to keep most records at their departmental level. Alternatively, they observed that each department should be supplied with qualified records managers and equipment to promote records management within the county departments. The County should ensure adequate budgetary allocations to facilitate records management programs such as addressing the issues on space, equipment and staff training and employing more trained and qualified record managers to enhance proper records management practice and in a bid to solving the encountered challenges.

When asked how the challenges mentioned can be solved, chief officers and record officers submitted that the County should enact and comply with records management policies and procedures and attend regular seminars and workshops on repositioning
county government employees on records management practice. They added that the County should ensure adequate budgetary allocations to facilitate records management programs such as addressing the issues on space, equipment and staff training and employing more trained and qualified record managers to enhance proper records management practice. Secretaries were in agreement with the record officers and record clerks that for the County to reap more from proper records management, they should spare more monetary allocations for the records department to facilitate the purchases of equipment such as files, cabinets and stationery.

In regard to what the County government should do to reap more from records, secretaries submitted that besides their secretarial duties, they should be trained on records management issues as a way of repositioning them to handling records professionally. They too requested for more recruitment of record clerks to support in filing, classification and retrieval, they requested for more modern equipment such as fast processing units, efficient and user-friendly computer interfaces and they needed constant workshops and seminars on records management.

Observation close checks revealed haphazard arrangement of files in the cabinets; some files spilled all over the floor, a true indication that there was inadequately trained staff and inadequate equipment and space, which, on the other hand, justifies a call for more budgetary allocations.

Most respondents pointed out that there was need for the County government to adopt a clear-cut records management policy that will guide the records management activities right from creation or reception to permanent preservation or destruction. Records management practice in Nyamira County Government faced, among others, the following challenges; lack of a clear-cut records management policy, inadequate support from the parent organization and external interferences from senior levels of management.

5. Conclusion
Respondents managed varied types of records including those that are financial and auditing in nature, minutes of meetings, records related to planning and development and policy-related records. County government decisions are based on information that is contained in these records; hence, proper records management enhance effectiveness and efficiency in governance. Proper records management is a tool to foster trust and good will from the public as it encourages accountability and transparency necessary for effective governance.

Proper, reliable, accountable, transparent and authentic records form a basis that positive decisions on County governance can be informed. It was submitted that properly managed records provide a basis for equity in resource distributions, hence fostering confidence among the public, which results in good will from the people on county government projects, hence smooth governance. Through proper records of statistics, the county is able to ensure proper planning for the future of its subjects in terms of creation of employment, food security, provision of education, provision of health services, improving infrastructure and provision of water.

Although there are no clear-cut records management policies in place, records regulatory bodies such as information and documentation records management part II, ISO 15489, helped greatly in laying standards for records management. There still were inconsistencies in records management practice, an indication that Organization Standards (ISO: 2001) for records management that was in place was not fully complied with.

The County is faced with challenges in records management, mainly inadequate policies and insufficient funding. Other challenges identified were inadequately trained
personnel, insufficient record storage equipment and space, lack of proper disposal policies and inadequate funding. The County should ensure adequate budgetary allocations to facilitate records management programs such as addressing the issues on space, equipment and staff training and employing more trained and qualified record managers to enhance proper records management practice and in a bid to solving the encountered challenges.

5.1 Suggestions for further research
The study restricted itself to the predetermined objectives and scope that it was only able to cover records which had a direct influence in governance and thus did not exhaustively cover all records. The study therefore suggests that there is a need to conduct research on records management practice in support of governance in private organizations of Kenya. Surveys indicate that not many studies have been undertaken on the same line. It is therefore on this platform that the study recommends an investigation into private sector records.

References


Further reading


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