

The role of ODL in providing support for the decentralization and democratization process in Namibia

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When Namibia achieved its independence during March 1990 the country's public service was inherited by an inexperienced bureaucracy. The running of central and local government affairs was never a matter for local people before independence. The decentralization and transfer of administrative power to the local and regional government officials requires education and skill training on local government matters.

The Namibian College of Open Learning identified the educational gap in the field of local government within the country and introduced the Certificate in Local Government Studies (CLGS) programme. The CLGS is tailor-made and aimed at supporting capacity building initiatives of regional councils and local authorities. It also provides opportunities for school leavers who have an interest in a career in regional and local government.

This paper highlights the description of how the programme is offered. It highlights the profile of learners who have participated on the programme as well as the success and challenges during the past two years since the introduction of the programme. The paper highlights the attitude of learners who have completed the Certificate in Local Government Studies through ODL and the impact of the programme on the communities.

Introduction

From its inception in March 1990, the government of the Republic of Namibia was faced with a problem of creating government structures that could answer to the needs of the citizens in terms of service delivery while at the same time enhancing the concept of nation building. As an outcome of this, the government of the Republic of Namibia promulgated the Regional Councils Act of 1992, Act 22 of 1992 to provide for the establishment of regional councils and to serve as an enabling legislation conferring the powers and authority to such institutions.

The term regional government refers to the second tier or level of government found just below central government. It is an institution that operates within a region in Namibia. Regions are normally divided according to their unique geographical area, and not along racial or ethnic lines as was the case before independence.

In Namibia, regions are self-governing units of government. There are thirteen regions and they all have councils that serve as legislative bodies and appointed officials that implement the decisions of such bodies. Regional government is brought about by decentralisation that one could define as a process of distributing some of the authority and responsibility of central government to sub national geographical units so that these institutions may take responsibility for the provision of certain goods and services to communities at a local level.

The process of decentralization is widely regarded as fundamental in enhancing democracy and good governance. It allows people at grass- root level to participate in government and gives them the power to make decisions on matters that affect their daily lives.

Challenges

Regional and Local government institutions are faced with several challenges, because of the multiplicity of roles they have to fulfill. If these challenges are overcome, it would ensure their viability.

These challenges include the challenge for the maintenance of democratic ideals. Local government institutions are established to perform functions of a local nature, which central governments find difficult to perform because of their remoteness from local situations and, specifically, because of the local nature of certain services, which makes one area different from others. It is imperative that these local people determine the mixture of services they want and how they need these services to be provided to them.

The challenges of local authorities lie in their ability to manage local affairs. This is an important function that has been found wanting in many local authorities. More often than not, local authority managers are accused of corruption, misuse of funds and general administrative ineptitude.

Methodologies

The CLGS is a one year programme which is mainly presented in the distance mode. The instructional package is made up of seven modules of printed materials. Care has been taken to write the guides in such a way that it is user friendly and complete on its own. The learners are invited to the College for a six day orientation workshop three times a year. The orientation includes, amongst other, Introduction to Open Distance Learning and basic Computer. Subject experts, who function as tutors meet the learners for a minimum of four hours three times a year to orient them on the subject matters. Tutors are expected to foster a culture of problem-solving inquiry, critical thinking of which group work is featured as this gives learners a chance to discover that they are not empty vessels and they have a lot to share in addition to what is in the guides.

The study pack that contains the printed study guides, assignments and tutorial letter are distributed to the learners at the beginning of the orientation workshop. This is to avoid the late or non arrival of the study material if sent by post.

Adequate support is provided to the learners and includes the following:

- Accessible user-friendly and interactive curriculum materials;
- Tutorial support which includes face-face and telephonic contact with tutors;
- Tutor-marked assignments
- Access to additional materials at the NOLNet centres across the country

The modules have numerous self-mark activities and the participants are expected to complete them.

Participants

The participants enrolled during the 2006-2007 academic years come from varied backgrounds. Most of them are female (58%) and 42% male. The majority of learners (72%) of them fall between the age range of 30-48.

Only ten percent of the learners on the programme have tertiary qualifications, the highest have Masters Degree. Administrative personnel in the local authorities form the largest group (31%), many were sponsored by their employer. The number of the out of school youth on the programme is significant (19%) and their parents sponsored them. Most of these youth are using this course as an entry point to the Diploma in Local Government Studies at the University of Namibia. Other people on the programme are police officers, members in the defense force, youth officers, teachers and employees in other different private and public sectors. The course fee is about U\$485.

Result and Achievements

Upon the official launch of the programme during March 2006, the Deputy Minister of Regional and Local Government, Housing and Rural Development Hon. Kazenambo Kazenambo welcomed the initiative that is closely associated with the ministry's decentralization process. The deputy minister said, "the course is equipping you local authority officials in how to deal with people and communities with diverse backgrounds and it takes government to the people allowing the people to take part in decision making on the ground".

Mr. Pio Nganate, the Vice President of Association of Local Authorities in Namibia (ALAN) at the same occasion stated that unless the local and regional councilors have the vital knowledge through the recently launched courses like the CLGS, they would keep on doing a disservice to the communities.

During the marketing campaign in October 2007, the Major of Ongwediva stated that most Councilors approve budgets without any or little understanding of what it entails, because the Chief Executive Officers are the people who draft the budgets. For that reason he urged his colleagues to enroll for the programme after having been briefed about the various subjects.

Thirty six percent of the learners enrolled during the 2006-2007 academic year have completed the programme successfully. Note worthy is that include the Mayor of one of the Oshikuku Village Council.

Attendance at the face-face workshops was high (72%). Most learners submitted their assignments on time. Most tutors on the programme were senior officials in the Ministry of Regional local Government and could address subject topics with confidence relating to the experience obtained.

Two of the Councilors on the programme shared their appreciation that the course enabled them to learn about their rights & responsibilities. They stated that for long the Chief Executive Officers made most of the decisions and the Mayors and Councilors only rubber-stamped. Regional and Local Councilors are politically elected and as the result most of them are not well acquainted with the Local government Act which outlines their duties and functions.

During the first face-face session, the tutor referred the learners to the Local Government and Traditional Authority Acts. Most learners (95%) have heard about the document in name, but did not know what they were about, including those learners who are employed in the Regional and Local government sector. The College provided copies of the Acts to all the registered learners, because some of the assignments referred to those documents. During the evaluation of the workshops and the course, learners who are working in the regional and local authority sector stated that now they have a better understanding of the operations of their offices.

An accountant in one of the Local authorities, who completed the programme, shared with the programme coordinator that she never bothered about the local Authority Act before, but now after having studied the course she is now able to apply the functions in the budget. She said that she is now able to advise the council appropriately when budgeting and align it to Vision 2030 for the region.

Participants of the programme who are not working in the Regional and Local Government sector aired their view that the course enlightens them on their responsibilities as community members. They have come to the realization that they as community members should direct the Local authority as to what they expect to be done, which is not happening due to ignorance among the communities.

Challenges of offering the Certificate in Local Government Studies through ODL

During the first year most learners failed the subject Public Finance and Accounting, as a result they could not obtain the certificate. It was found that 90% of the registered learners have not done Accounting at secondary level and terminologies were strange. The College then arranged Accounting tutorials over eight Saturday in ten of the major towns throughout the country. This was in addition to the three vacation workshop sessions. Learners welcomed this intervention and attendance was high. This resulted into an improved pass rate of 76% from 24% previous year in the subject Public Finance and Accounting.

Learners who are in remote areas find it difficult to submit their assignments in time. Reference books are also not easily accessible in remote villages. There are many people who have worked in the Regional and Local Government sector for more than ten years and would like to enroll on the programme. Unfortunately they cannot be admitted because they don't meet the minimum admission requirements. Recently the College has developed an Recognition of Prior Learning Policy, which will be used to provide access to those with many year of relevant experience.

Most registered Councilors do not complete the programme within the first year and they attribute this to their heavy schedules and the fact that they travel quite often. Although they don't pass all seven subjects during the one year, the majority passes more than three subjects and they re-register during the following year to complete the remaining once.

The dropout rate is also a concern, during 2006 academic year, 18% of the enrolled learners did not sit for the final examinations. They quitted along the way. Some claimed to have many other responsibilities and were unable to get around their studies. Others were unable to pay the course fee by ht due date.

Conclusion:

Every year more officers from the Regional and Local Authority are enrolling for the programme. Those who have gone through the programme inform the others and interest is high since the inception of the programme. The College has urged graduates to write short stories about the impact of the programme on they lives. We wish to publish these stories by end of the 2008 academic year.

References:

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