

**A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF  
BACKLOG CHALLENGES AT  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE:  
PROSPECTS AND ACCESS  
IMPLICATIONS**

Livingstone Muchefa  
& Tafadzwa Chigodora  
National Archives of Zimbabwe

# Introduction

- Backlog challenges are topical issues in archives across the globe
- Backlog challenges are as old as every archival institution
- (ICA) 1996 Code of Ethics, Principle 6, “Archivists should promote the widest possible access to archival materials and provide an impartial service to all users”.
- The mission statement for NAZ is “to acquire, preserve and give access to documentary heritage”. These place the need to promote access at the core of archival business
- Most African National archives face backlog challenges due to staff shortage (Garabha 2005 and Mnjama 2006)

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- CASE STUDY

## DESIGN

- Qualitative design

## DATA GATHERING TECHNIQUES

- Literature review
- Questionnaires
- Observations

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Why do backlogs exist?
- How did it grow at NAZ ?
- Is it new phenomena?
- What is the remedy?

# EVOLUTION OF BACKLOG AT NAZ

- NAZ est. in 1935 from the question of custody of BSACo records covering 45yrs (1890-1935)
- 1953-63 Federal period saw expansion of records
- In the 1970s effort was to clear backlog of manuscripts
- Every time the institution was fighting backlog of historical manuscripts that of public archives will be accumulating hand and vice versa.
- By 1980 serious backlog challenges were being reported on manuscripts
- By 1983 processing public archives and manuscripts was stopped to concentrate on federal records

# Cont...

- 1986 brought new era – legislatively
- The NAZ Act (25:06) closure period of public records from 30yrs to 25yrs. The 5yrs period promptly inflated backlog figures (NAZ Annual report 1986)
- By 1992 backlog was at 2000c.ft
- By the 1990s challenges of shelving space resulted in temporary cessation of processing
- The challenge still exist

# FACTORS AIDING BACKLOG

- COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT POLICY
- A sample of 8 archivists was used – 4 of them said they did not know the existence of such a document.
- 2 of them believed the NAZ Act was the guiding document when it comes to acquisition. There was no distinction between the Act and the policy
- These findings showed NAZ need to invest more in policy documents to refine the nature of our collection.
- The basic duty of an archivist is acquisition of archives (Mazikana 1999) and the process involves formulating policies (Mazikana and Ngulube 2001)

# Cont.

- STRUCTURAL INFLEXIBILITY/ CHALLENGES
- For more than 3 decades now the structure of NAZ has not changed (no. of archivists).
- Ministries/Departments have expanded over the years with deposits increasing but NAZ structure not responding accordingly
- 1980 Zim had 17 parastatals, now currently at about 91 plus local government
- Institutions have never had enough staff to cope up with incoming work to deal with backlog (Garabha 2010)
- If the High Court deposited about 800c.ft in 2014 only and the PARS has only 6 archivists to do the processing backlog becomes inevitable

# Shelving space/material

- This is a challenge that is hinged on financial constraints.
- NAZ infrastructural resources are generally expensive for African economies
- Challenges of shelving material and space affect processing pace consequently aiding backlog
- BRAIN DRAIN
- NAZ has had a lot of its staff leaving for greener pastures, and most often critical offices were often filled with new inexperienced personnel thereby affecting pace of doing work
- Increased attrition rate on trained professional and technocrats who are leaving for what is perceived to be greener pastures (Mazikana 1999)

# EFFORTS TO CURB BACKLOG AT NAZ

## PRACTICUMS

- Assistance by these bilateral arrangement between university students of Records and Archives and NAZ helped reduce backlog
- Where there are few trained archivists, the only way to overcome backlog accumulations is by adopting a series of cooperative workshop (Mnjama 2006)

# ACCESS IMPLICATIONS

- Researchers are deprived of their right to access public records
- Some Records of the 1970s and 1980s are yet to be processed
- The 22000c.ft backlog measures archives supposed that are supposed to be accessed
- If archives lack properly trained archivists the end result is reprocessing of poorly referenced/ poor arrangement and description of archives

# Conclusion

- The effects of backlog challenges are double-fold to the institution and to the user
- For NAZ it is expensive to come up with strategies to reduce it. It deprives users of their access rights
- Backlogs must be reduced to meet users research expectations
- Investing in e-records starting with records creators can be essential in addressing users requirements

# Recommendations

- Backlog challenges in an archive can be resolved by:
- (i) relying on well-defined collecting policies to guide all collecting decisions
- (ii) collecting responsibly,
- (iii) not collecting more than your institution can reasonably make available and
- (iv) making appraisal decisions before material is accessioned into the repository.