THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE DAG HAMMARSKJOLD LIBRARY: BRIDGING THE INFORMATION GAP BETWEEN THE DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

John A Aarons

Executive Director, National Library of Jamaica

The assumption can be made that the late Dag Hammarskold would have agreed with the clause in the Millennium Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on September 8, 2000 which pledged the UN to "ensure that the benefits of new technologies especially information and communication technologies …are available to all." [1]This resolution is important as it has now been generally accepted that information and communications technologies (ICTs) have important roles to play in improving the level of living and the quality of life of people, especially those in the developing countries of the world where the challenge of using ICTs effectively is greatest.

This task has now become urgent as the advent of the Information Superhighway and the subsequent rapid increase in the availability of information has resulted in further division between rich and poor countries. As a UNDP Sustainable Development Networking Programme for Jamaica has noted "The fast growth of the Internet has given a crucial alarm signal to developing countries: the existing information gap will grow even more unless they launch the process that will give affordable access to all key sectors of society to the world wide web". [2]Reducing the 'digital divide' has therefore become a crucial item on the agenda of national governments and international organizations.

Libraries should be seen as central to Digital Divide solutions because as the American Library Association has said the "digital divide is not just about access to a computer. Libraries have worked to bridge the divide between the information 'haves' and 'have nots' for more than a 100 years." [3]Libraries are therefore ideally placed to harness the new technology to provide faster and more effective access to information. "Our time has come," asserted Ross Shimmon, the Secretary-General of IFLA, " but only if we grasp the challenge."[4]

The Dag Hammarskjold Library has certainly risen to the challenge and as the lead library in the UN system it is using modern tools of information and

---

[1] Millennium Summit Declaration (A/RES/55/2,para.20)
[2] Jamaica Sustainable Development Network Website http:www.jsdnp.org.jm
[3] American Library Association website http://www.ala.org
[4] CD-ROM, ACRUIL Conference, Cuba May 27 – June 2, 2001

communications technology in order to connect the public to sources of information in the entire United Nations system.   In May 2000, Anwarul Chowdhury of Bangladesh, supporting Nigeria's statement on behalf of the Group of 77 and China noted with satisfaction, in a meeting of the Information Committee that "The Dag Hammarskjold Library was gradually becoming a virtual library with world outreach, making United Nations information and other acquired materials electronically accessible to a growing number of users." [5]The Library was therefore having a direct impact on the lives of countless people all around the world.

The late Dag Hammarskjold could not have foreseen the development of the Internet, the World Wide Web and the 'information explosion', which has become a feature of our world today. However he had a vision of a library in a building of " the highest quality, aesthetically designed, furnished, and equipped in conformity with the most modern library standards"[6] playing a prominent role in the affairs of the United Nations. He therefore would have approved of the enhanced role of the Library in information retrieval and dissemination in the electronic environment.

As the United Nations is a major publisher of materials, the dissemination of information contained in these materials has been a major focus of the library. Bibliographic control of the documents and publications produced by the organization from its worldwide locations has always been a function of the Library. The United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS), the primary bibliographic database of UN material, was established in 1979 and offers access to the documentary output of the UN and to non-UN publications acquired by the DHL. Originally it was only available on-line to the Secretarial staff, Missions to the UN, foreign governments and the depository libraries. Now it is freely available on the Internet.   As it is comprised of full texts of documents, speeches, resolutions etc. it has revolutionized the availability of these materials.

 Although the primary purpose of the Library was – and still is – to serve the information needs of the staff of the Secretariat and those of the permanent missions, it had from its very beginnings a strong outreach programme in the Depository Libraries programme. This programme has grown that today there are 407 depository libraries in 145 countries. These libraries form the core of the United Nations library network.

Most of these libraries are located in the developing countries of the world and are usually sited in a national or university library.   There are 14 depository libraries in the Caribbean covering the English and Spanish speaking territories. Establishing these libraries, monitoring their progress and providing guidance on the organization of the materials were some of the preoccupations of the DHL in the early years. Training for members of staff of the depository libraries was held

[5] http:www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/20000502/pi1244.doc.html
[6] extract from Statement http:www.un.org/depts./dhl/dag/dhlibrary.htm

on a regular basis. UN agencies also established libraries in their offices in the field so a vast UN library network was built up.

However the composition and effectiveness of the depository libraries have changed over the years. Whereas these libraries can – and many still do – receive materials in the traditional printed format, the materials are also available on CD - ROMS, The DHL has produced full-text CD-ROMS of its holdings and these are available in depository and field libraries all over the world.

The process of dissemination of U N documentary materials has been greatly assisted by the establishment and development of the DHL's web site, which contains the Library's bibliographic catalogue along with full text databases of U N documents etc. The Library has also produced a thesaurus to the UNBLS, which is multi-disciplinary in scope. The electronic version of this thesaurus (the 4th. Edition) is the first edition to be available in all the six (6) official languages of the United Nations. Its publication is significant as it contains the terms used in subject analysis of documents and other materials relevant to the UN activities.

The existence of the web site has also allowed the Library to expand its role to provide information of a general nature such as listings of U N Conferences and Observances and information on a variety of topics such as flags and maps. An important feature of the site is that it is accessible in all the official languages of the UN. This multilingual approach by the Library has increased its ability to make information more readily available than was previously possible when information was restricted to languages such as English and French. In 1999 the Library's web site received 1.5 million 'hits'.[7]

The ease by which information can be accessed today makes networking of resources a practical and cost effective activity. In 1998 the Library pioneered the establishment of the United Nations Consortium for sharing the cost of site licenses for external on-line information services. In 2000 this Consortium had 37 member and offers products from 13 vendors.

Information technology has not only revolutionized access to collections by 'opening them up' to the wider world. It has also changed the concept of libraries as storehouses of materials containing the physical items such as books and CD-ROMS, likely to be of value to their clients. As the DHL moves towards being a 'virtual library', information no longer has to reside within its walls but can be obtained easily when required. This new development has not gone unnoticed by the UN Committee on Information as members noted that there was a reduction in the number of printed items being purchased by the Library. In fact, Mr. Chowdhury, in the speech referred to earlier, made a plea for the Library to acquire more publications from developing countries.

---

[7] Report of the Committee on Information 23rd Session, May 2002 (A/55/21)

The advent of the Internet also has meant that all the libraries in the United Nations system can be networked and all the resources of the UN accessed at any point. This is the objective of the United Nations System Shared Cataloguing and Public Access System (UNCAPS). This site, which is coordinated by the DHL, provides a web interface to the electronic resources of the libraries of the UN system of organizations. It provides a single point of access to library catalogues, indexes and abstract databases, library holdings, link to full text resources and archives.

However the Library must be concerned that the Internet is only available to a small percentage of the world's population. It is sobering to note that more than three quarters of Internet users live in the high-income OECD countries, which account for only 14% of the world's population. In the year 2000, only 3.2% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean were Internet users, up from 0.8% in 1998. While this is a significant increase, this can be compared with a staggering 54.3% of the population of the United States of America, up from 26.3% in 1998.[8]

Increasing access to the Internet should be an objective of the DHL as it seeks to disseminate information as widely as possible. One of the ways it is doing this is by increasing the capability of the depository and field libraries to access this information to assist their users. Training is an important component of this. In 2000 in cooperation with UN information centres and services, the Library organized four regional workshops for depository librarians in developing countries. Emphasis was placed on hands-on training in the use of UN resources on the Internet. A priority of the DHL should be to ensure that these libraries have a reliable and reasonable priced connection to the Internet. Using the Union Catalogue (UNCAT) they could gain access to the main collections of the UN and download materials as required. This would mean that they would not have to maintain a print collection of these materials.

The DHL is increasing its support to 'libraries in the field' and in 1999 it initiated an interactive technical assistance programme to support these libraries and help them to upgrade their services. The Library has even designed a database entitled SMLCAT for Small and Field Libraries and instructions for its use is available in a user-friendly format on the Library's web site. This programme should be very useful to libraries with limited professional staff in the developing countries as it is intended to promote resource sharing among U N libraries and avoid duplication of work. As a result, the DHL recommends that bibliographic tools developed by it such be used to identify and retrieve all U N material.

The DHL has not only kept pace with modern technological developments, but it has launched its own initiatives to provide greater public awareness of its collections as well as those of other libraries in the United Nations network. In

---

[8] UNDP Human Development Report, 2000, New York UNDP, 2001 p 56

doing this, it has not lost sight of its core responsibility of providing information to its users as in the year 2000/2001 it responded to 60,000 individual reference requests. [9]As a result of the digitization of documents and the creation of resource databases, large quantities of information within the Library are now easily accessible by persons all over the world. By making information available to persons in their own language, the DHL is playing its role in helping to bridge the information gap between developed and developing countries.

---

[9] Annual Report of the Secretary General, Sept. 2001 (A/56/1-6 Sept. 2001)
http:www.un.org/documents/secretariat.htm