

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

Christine Kisiedu
Professor
University of Ghana

Introduction

I would have been more comfortable if I had been given a specific topic to deal with in the context of this broad theme for this afternoon's discussion. However, I decided to focus on African concerns of the theme's developing countries dimension. I believe this is appropriate and indeed expected of me as Sub-Saharan Africa's main representative on the panel this afternoon.

This presentation will, therefore, focus mainly on Africa's concerns in this fast changing world, and what the DHL can do to assist in addressing them. Before I do that, however, let me place them in the context of Dag Hammarskjold's vision of the role of this great library that bears his name.

Dag Hammarskjold's Global Vision for the Role of the DHL

The late Dag Hammarskjold's vision for the Library was as a vital institution of study and research in the areas of its specialization, which include special collections on international law, organization and politics, international economics, social matters, and collections relating to the problems of developing countries. Well known himself as a bibliophile and a book-lover, a lover of the arts in general and literature in particular, and a scholar of repute, Dag Hammarskjold had great interest in and understanding of the librarian's work and the library world.¹ He saw the UN's role as an education force implemented through the Library's promotion of information flow and dissemination worldwide, in the context of its special but international focus. That he was personally closely involved in the planning of the new library was testimony to his close affinity

with the world of books. Although he did not live to see through the execution of his vision for the Library, the first Symposium² that was part of the launching of the DHL in November 1961 clearly demonstrated that he had infected his excellent staff of the Library with his enthusiasm and had their total commitment to his mission to establish a first class international library.

The DHL has executed this mission in the many and varied services it has made available to international librarianship, particularly through its lead role in establishing unsurpassed bibliographic tools for easy access to its vast and complicated resources and those of related UN agencies. These tools have served as an example for other libraries of the world. Of particular note is the UN Documents Index (UNDI), described as an essential instrument of bibliographic control and a master key to all the documents of the UN system.³

At the time of the 1961 Symposium, the library world had entered the threshold of a new era- that of the computer and electronic communication. The DHL has taken good advantage of the great benefits of automation and has transformed its excellent manual bibliographic tools into electronic, computer-mediated communication systems which can be accessed on the Internet, and which can also be acquired in CD-ROM and diskette format by libraries from any part of the world that needed them and had in place the right infrastructure for accessing them.

The Depository Library System

The promotion of information flow worldwide is particularly essential in developing countries where 80% of humanity lives, most of them in abject poverty and ignorance because organized information on which informed decisions can be made has always been scarce. The DHL has pursued this mandate, among others, through the system of depository libraries whereby, as a policy, all the UN's unrestricted documents are made available to select libraries in Member countries. In colonial Africa, the deposit library system came into being after a colony gained independence. The libraries accorded the deposit privilege have tended to be large and important institutions likee national libraries

and university/research libraries, and they were selected on the basis of expected use that would be made of the documents in their care.

The deposit libraries in the countries of Africa have provided information not just on the UN but also for research purposes to scholars, people in academia, politicians, policy makers in government, international officers, industry and commerce. In a continent that has always suffered from insufficient access to information, the system has been of invaluable help. At the Balme Library of the University of Ghana, the “UN Document Library” has offered this type of assistance since 1961. I also know for a fact that the Addis Ababa University’s UN Collection is a model in terms of its organization and also of its heavy usage.

Some of the UN agencies also have deposit arrangement with some deposit libraries. In Ghana, for example, which hosts the regional offices of the FAO, three main Universities i.e., the University of Ghana, the University of Cape Coast and the University of Science and Technology, which have large Faculties of Agriculture have received FAO documents for a long time. The FAO documents are housed in the deposit libraries with the UN documents, and disseminate information on all aspects of agriculture and related disciplines.

The World Bank has also adopted the deposit library concept in more recent times, Wherever they are, the World Bank collections are stored separately from the UN library and disseminate materials that are mainly reports on the Bank’s country and/or regional projects and special studies that are excellent sources for comparative development research.

I wish to make special mention of the DEVSIS experiment that was initiated at the ILO in the mid 1970. This was an innovative, computer-based system for establishing the development information systems in developing countries. This formed the basis of the Pan African Development Information System (PADIS) a development information network for Africa based at UNECA in Addis Ababa, now superceded by the Development Information Systems Department.

The Depository Libraries have so far received DHL's Services based largely on conventional manual methods of dissemination and in a somewhat reactive manner in that deposit documents have been sent down as required, and depository libraries have asked for whatever they needed when they required it. These methods were adequate for the purposes of the 1960s and even the '70s when African countries were preoccupied with the problems of establishing themselves as sovereign states and equal members of the community of nations. Questions of decolonization, their status at the UN, and where they stood in a world polarized by the Cold War and the North-South (or is it East-West) divide were their principal concerns. Besides, at the time, the newly independent countries of Africa did not have much problem with funding; they had, in fact, begun to set up libraries along the lines established by their colonial masters.

Need for Change of Focus:

But for the DHL and its client libraries, the situation has changed. There is a new world order dominated by information and the new technologies, which drive it. The new information society is fostering the development of a global culture typified by a multi-dimensional communication apparatus that has turned the world into a so-called global village. For me, the important aspect of the analogy of the global village is that, in the normal village community, information travels quickly from one end of the community to the other, and information and most other things are shared. In the global context, this analogy is not quite true. The potential exists, but the reality is that, while it may be true for developed countries, it is not so for developing countries, certainly not for those in Africa, where connectivity is limited to the capital cities and a few towns where in most cases only 20% – 30 % of the people live. In Africa, therefore, connectivity and the access to information that results from it, is not available to the bulk of the people.

This situation has also resulted in the creation of a local information divide between city dwellers, on the one hand, and rural dwellers on the other. For general information or news, the radio bridges the gap since people in remote areas have access to this facility. But access to organized, hard information is inaccessible to them. This state of affairs is

the result of lack of the resources required for connectivity – the technology, the appropriate skills, political will- and ignorance. These have international dimensions like the unequal global economic order, which has long placed developing countries at economic disadvantage and plunged them into a cycle of poverty.

The bottom line in all this is lack of the types of information required for effective research, decision- making and development. It is my opinion that the DHL can assist in capacity building to improve the situation by shifting emphasis to interaction with depository librarians who have been largely invisible collaborators all these years.

The DHL could adopt a more proactive approach in its relationship with the depository libraries in the developing countries in general and Africa in particular. What is being suggested here is that the staff of such should be assisted to upgrade their skills in information management techniques such as indexing/abstracting, or other information storage/retrieval programmes in which the DHL possesses acclaimed expertise. This could be done in collaboration with the other UN agencies involved in the depository system through exchange of staff between the DHL and the UN agencies on the one hand, and the libraries of the Member countries on the other.

Such programmes would expose librarians from the depository libraries to the excellent practices and the automated environments of the DHL and the various UN information systems, upgrade their skills and empower them to design bibliographic tools that will improve access and information flow for their communities, and for the world at large. Staff from the DHL and the other libraries of the UN system would also experience at close range the cultural milieu for which they have been collecting or disseminating documents and other forms of information, and the problems and aspirations of its peoples. This kind of arrangement will give the DHL and its collaborators a more sympathetic understanding of these concerns.

Electronic Networking is an effective method of resource sharing which could and should be encouraged among the libraries of Africa, beginning at the country level. Some

African countries have taken the first steps in establishing networks to enhance the informational resources available to them through sharing. Exchange of staff would identify this as an important area to focus on, considering the DHL's experience in the area with the UN agencies, and its immediate (American) neighbours.

The DHL is also in a position to play a more visible advocacy role in the number of project initiatives that have been launched globally and also in particular regions of the developing world, to address the vexed issue of third world information isolation. Most of these projects tend to concentrate on the technology issues and ignore the role of libraries and librarians as information providers and content developers.

In the Africa context, a blue print to “leap frog” Africa into the information society has been designed by African governments since 1996. This is the African Information Society Initiative (AISI),⁴ which is being implemented through the Addis Ababa – based regional commission, UNECA, in partnership with several UN agencies, notably UNESCO, ITU and the World Bank. Included also are government agencies and non-governmental organizations. The DHL could assist the library of the Commission, now part of UNECA’s Development Information Systems Department, which has been in the frontline of the implementing the AISI programme, to address the issue of content development – harnessing the information resources of Africa and packaging them, as only libraries and librarians know best to do, to make them available to Africa’s researchers and the rest of the world.

There are not many library initiatives in Africa at the continental or regional level that are addressing these problem of Africa’s information isolation. But a recently established and on-going project could be cited as an example that may suggest similar areas of need. This is the DATAD project. DATAD stands for Database of Theses and Dissertations Database on Africa. It is a project of the Association of African Universities, which is based in Accra, Ghana, and DATAD’s objective is to create an online database of theses and dissertations from African universities.⁵ DHL could encourage the UNECA Library to play a more prominent role in identifying a similar project like the indexing of Africa’s

research journals, for example, in collaboration with other African libraries. This is an area of great need where DHL could also make a more or less direct input by way of assistance in the training of librarians and information workers from African countries in indexing and other retrieval techniques, and how such activities could be made sustainable.

I appreciate the fact that the DHL is a special library and that being an international library as well, it has its own peculiar rules. But I think the time has come for the Library to de-emphasize its special nature and focus more on its international, global responsibilities, particularly to developing countries, where such assistance is urgently required. Besides, the DHL has expressed the aspirations of mankind. I believe this is why the depository privilege has been extended to all types of library authority- national, public, special and academic libraries. This fact explains the diffuseness of the DHL's areas of specialization, and justifies its adoption of a more universal outlook in its mission of promoting information flow worldwide.

These tasks should be undertaken in collaboration with the UN agencies some of whom, like the FAO and the WHO, have excellent libraries at their regional offices in Accra and Congo Brazzaville respectively. The WHO library has tackled the problem of access to Africa's medical information resources with its **African Index Medicus Project**. FAO could match it with a similar project on an aspect of agriculture, and so should the UNHCR's Africa office, for a continent with the largest refugee population and some of the most acute accompanying problems. A database on refugeeism in Africa would be a mine of information for keeping track of and managing the continent refugee crises.

These are a few of the challenges I would like to present to us all for consideration. The logistical implications of such an expanded area of responsibility will be quite considerable. The General Assembly is being urged to consider making appropriate provision in its budgetary allocation to the DHL.

REFERENCES

1. The Library Symposium, 17 November 1961 In: The Dag Hammarskjold Library; Gift of the Ford Foundation: [Proceedings, Dedication and Symposium] New York: United Nations, Pp 51-53
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid, p. 90, col.1
4. African Information Society Initiative (AISI) is an action framework to build African information infrastructure adopted in May 1996 by the Un Economic Commission of Africa (UNECA) Conference of Ministers. AISI is also the principal activity within the United Nations System-Wide Special Initiative on Africa Programme on Harnessing Information Technology for Development (HITD/SIA).

[URL:http://www.bellanet.org/aisi/](http://www.bellanet.org/aisi/)
5. DATAD- Database of Africa Theses and Dissertations Project- was mooted at a planning meeting organized by PIAC (Project for Information Access and Connectivity) in Nairobi in January 1998. The viability of the project was discussed and a feasibility study was agreed on as first step. PIAC in collaboration with AAU carried out the study to determine the viability of a pilot project between March and December of the same year. A Pilot Phase set up soon thereafter and involving eight (8) universities, is nearing a successful conclusion.