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

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It is an honour and a privilege to be invited to participate in this Symposium, and I am delighted to be here today. I wish to thank the Dag Hammarskjold Library for this very kind invitation. I bring greetings and best wishes from the University of the South Pacific on this 40th Aniversary celebration.

Much has happened in the field of information in the past 40 years, and there is no doubt that the role of the Dag Hammarskjold Library has evolved and changed over the years.

In the networked knowledge-based global economy of today, information is a crucial and strategic resource for economic growth and sustainable development.

With developments in information and communications technology, information is now easily accessible in "developed" countries, and in certain sectors of "developing" countries. But much of the "developing" world suffers from a paucity of information, resulting in marginalisation and disadvantages.

The South Pacific region is no different from other developing countries in this respect.   The "Information Gap" in the South Pacific

The University of the South Pacific serves 12 island countries in the South Pacific region: Cook Islands, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Tokelau, Niue, Nauru and Marshall Islands.

These islands are some of the most isolated geographically from the rest of the world.   They have very small populations, ranging from a mere 4,000 in Niue and Tokelau to less than a million in Fiji.

Because of the geographical spread and isolation, it has been very difficult to build cost effective and efficient national infrastructures.

The lack of economies of scale has hindered the development of even the most basic of services (e.g. water, electricity and transport), let alone the development of an efficient information infrastructure.

Communications are often erratic and costly: access to a telephone service is far from universal, line quality can be poor, travel by any means of transport (road, ship or air) is limited as well as expensive, postal communication is generally slow and unresponsive, although fax and more recently electronic communications have improved things tremendously.

The scenario in the South Pacific:

- With a few exceptions in the urban areas and centres, educational facilities are very basic and inadequate in most parts of the Pacific.

- The publishing and media industries are relatively undeveloped. Radio is the most effective way of information dissemination. Most of the content in newspapers and other media (e.g. TV) comes from outside rather than local sources. There is little in-depth analysis.

- There is a lack of bookshops, and there are many difficulties in collection and acquisitions of publications due to the undeveloped infrastructure.

- There are very few well-resourced or comprehensive libraries or information centres, and access to information sources (print or electronic) is very limited.

   The only countries with National Libraries are Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Solomons, Kiribati and Tuvalu. There are very few public libraries and school libraries are either non existent or very basic. Most libraries have no budgets for collection development, and encounter difficulties especially in acquiring local publications. There is a lack of trained staff in most libraries.

   The USP Library is an exception as it is well supported by the University. The University uses technology extensively and operates its own satellite network (USPNet).

- The benefits of ICT are being felt in the South Pacific, but access is still limited due to constraints such as
    - infrastructure restrictions
    - the high cost of telecommunications
    - the lack of computers, lack of expertise
    - prohibitively high costs of equipment and licensing agreements.

   Internet is available in most countries, but the costs are too high for the majority, and the low bandwidth and slow speed can be very frustrating. This "digital divide" contributes to the widening information gap.

- There is a lack of understanding and appreciation of the value of information. Most people do not know how to find the information they need and how to use the information they find to reach a decision.

The Role of the Dag Hammarskjold Library

The Dag Hammarskjold Library has played a significant role in bridging the information gap through the depository library system. In the South Pacific, there are 7 UN depository libraries whose collections have enhanced the information base in a region that largely suffers from a severe lack of information. These are:

- USP Library, Fiji: Depository Library for ILO, UN (since 1969), Unesco (since 1977), and World Bank (since Nov. 1985); UNRISD, UNU
- USP Alafua Campus Library, Samoa: FAO since 1982
- USP Emalus Campus Library, Vanuatu: ODS and UN Treaty System (Since Dec. 2000)
- Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Library (Vaini Research Station), Tonga: FAO (since 1993)
- Agriculture Library (Totokoitu Research Station), Cook Islands: FAO (since 1994)
- Nelson Memorial Public Library, Samoa: UN (since 1949), Unesco
- Reserve Bank of Vanuatu: World Bank (since November 1985)
- National Library Services, Solomon Islands: ILO

These collections provide a rich source of information on relevant scientific, socio-economic and political issues that confront our nations.

However, from USP's experience as a depository library, there is a lack of awareness of the collection and it is underutilized. The Library recognizes the need to publicise the collection more widely, but we face staff and resource constraints. We also feel that for any real benefits to accrue, the Dag Hammarskjold Library must provide staff with training in the use of the indexes, etc. Until 1999, when one of our staff members attended a training seminar, little training was provided in the use of these valuable resources. There have been many developments (e.g. website) since and the staff must be trained in the use of these resources.

The Dag Hammarskjold Library has responded in very positive and innovative ways to its changing role, especially in view of changes brought about by new technology.

The development of an excellent multimedia website that provides links to a wealth of information and the publication of documents electronically, with advanced meta-information and fully web-enabled features, are to be commended.

We note that depository libraries can now choose to substitute electronic access for printed copies of UN publications. As we have space problems this option appears very attractive. However, we are also mindful of the fact that electronic access is still very limited in the Pacific with very few libraries in the region having the capacity to use the technology, and that the majority of our users do not have access to the technology as yet.

The UN System through various programmes such as UNDP has been very pro-active in helping developing countries maximise the benefits of ICT to "leapfrog" into the information age, and has been working in areas such as public policy reform, regulatory and network readiness, improvements in connectivity, and building human capacity. I am sure that the Dag Hammarskjold Library is also involved in these broad issues.

It can and should play a strategic role in mobilizing action to assist libraries in developing countries (not just the libraries belonging to the UN System) to pursue the opportunities and benefits offered by ICT.

As I have mentioned earlier, with the exception of a few, libraries in the Pacific are very poorly resourced and desperately need support to mitigate the wide information and digital divide that has developed.

USP Library would welcome a closer working relationship and partnership with the Dag Hammarskjold Library in bridging the information gap and achieving the ideal of universal access to information.