SCECSAL

THE STANDING CONFERENCE OF EASTERN, CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN LIBRARIANS (SCECSAL)[1]:

It's Impact in the Region

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Introduction

The idea of forming the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians – SCECSAL- which is commonly referred to as the "Standing Conference" (-S.C-) was conceived in Nairobi, Kenya in 1972. It is only fitting at this stage, 25 years since, to look back, analyze and evaluate its success, failures and possible solutions for its future progress.

Prior to the Standing Conference, there existed the East African Library Association (E.A.L.A) – which was established in Nairobi in September, 1956. The immediate past President of the Australian Library Association, Miss Allinor Archer visited Kenya in August, 1956.   During her stay, she discovered that there was no library association in the region. She held a series of meetings with individual librarians in Nairobi regarding benefits of such an association to librarians and the nation at large. Eventually, she managed to convince and catalyze them into forming an association. A month later, the Nairobi librarians held their first meeting. When the association was later formed on the first March, 1957, a High Court Judge, Justice Forbes, the Chairman of the Supreme Court Library committee was elected its first President.

During that time (the 1960s), East Africa was administratively one country, even though there were separate governors for Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda during the colonial era, and separate presidents for Kenya, Uganda

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[1] With the adoption of the SCECSAL Constitution in April 2000, Windhoek, Namibia, the full name changed to the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library and Information Associations. However, the acronym SCECSAL was retained.

and Tanganyika which later became Tanzania out of the marriage of Tanganyika and Zanzibar. During these periods of the colonial and early independence East African countries had a single: currency, Airways, Railways and Harbours, Judiciary, System of education, Research Organizations, etc. All these were administered on behalf of the national governments by the East African High Commission in the colonial period and the East African Community after independence. It was therefore normal that when the E.A.L.A was formed in Nairobi, librarians had no option but to have the name East Africa on the association.

Historical Development

Until 1964, the E.A.L.A. held all its meetings in Nairobi and it published the E.A.L.A. Bulletin. During that time (1964), the number of qualified librarians had increased on the East African scene in particular, the African and Indian librarians.

This increase led to the need to form branches of E.A.L.A. in the three countries in order to enable national librarians to have a closer feel of an association of librarians. Resulting from this, the E.A.L.A., Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda branches were formed and registered in their respective countries in 1965. While branches held annual meetings, the E.A.L.A. held biannual conferences on rotational basis.

The first biannual conference of the E.A.L.A. was held in Nairobi in 1966. This was followed by the second and third biannual conferences in Dar-es-salaam and Kampala in 1968 and 1970 respectively. It was during the fourth biannual conference held in Nairobi in 1972 that, while it marked a complete cycle, it also ended the E.A.L.A. as an organization, but not to its biannual conferences. The E.A.L.A had reached the age of fifteen years.

Prior to this, the E.A. Community had signs of weakening in its administration as a result of poor political leadership. Thereafter, organizations plus institutions started regarding one another with suspicion. Subsequently, there arose a requirement for East Africans to obtain immigration documents in order to travel between the three countries. Many things started working badly and under strained relationships. Hence, librarians didn't want to pretend to be different or immune from this situation and behave as though all was well. It is as a result of this that a suggestion was made by the Chairman of the E.A.L.A., Tuck Lwanga of Uganda at the 1972 E.A.L.A. biannual conference that:

(i)   The E.A.LA be dissolved;

(ii)   A standing Conference of Eastern, and Central African Librarians – SCECAL – be formed to replace the E.A.L.A;

(iii)   The Standing conference be held every two years for members to interact, share views and compare ideas and experiences in the field of Information Sciences;

(iv)   The Standing Conferences be held on rotational basis;

(v)   The E.A.L.A. Bulletin ceases publication forth with;

(vi)   The Standing Conference to start publishing Conference Proceedings regularly;

(vii)   Strong National Library Associations be formed as spring boards for the Standing Conferences.

Since Tanzania was scheduled to host the fifth conference of the E.A.L.A., it automatically became the indisputable host of the first SCECAL in 1974.

Librarians from Zambia had been on the East African scene since 1964, first as students at the E.A. School of Librarianship Makerere University to which they sent two of the pioneer students. As a result, Zambians participated in the E.A.L.A. biannual conferences of 1966 – 1972 on observer status. The number of Zambians increased during the 1974 biannual conference which was held in Dar-es-salaam, Tanzania. To that end when the Zambia Library Association therefore applied to host the next conference, trust and sincere friendship had already been effectively developed and established amongst the East African librarians.

It was unanimously agreed therefore that the 1976 SCECAL be held in Lusaka, Zambia. The Lusaka meeting then formally established the SCECAL. During that conference, the Uganda Library Association applied to host the next Standing Conference. Due to the hostile political atmosphere prevailing in the country then the Kenya Library Association was elected as the "stand in" should Uganda Library Association fail to host the Standing Conference. Just as it was voiced at the Lusaka conference, the political atmosphere in Uganda worsened. General Iddi Amin overthrew the Civil Government of Obote. Firing squads replaced the courts as the means of dispensing justice. Some librarians, amongst other Ugandans were killed, others were imprisoned while the majority, like caged birds, fretful to sly the coup, fought their way to the exists of the borders and fled the country. Resulting from this, KLA became the obvious host of the third Standing Conference in 1978. Uganda Library Association never again managed to host the SCECAL until 1990. This explains what a political atmosphere can do to the Standing Conference in the region.

During the 1978 Standing Conference held in Nairobi, an application to host the next conference in 1980 was received from a "strange association". A representative from the Lesotho Library Association, Mrs. 'Mampaila Lebotsa

made the historic bid. There was an objection which was loud and clear. Participants stated that:

(i)   Lesotho Library Association was unheard of by majority of the participants;

(ii)   Lesotho was considered to be too far – I don't know – too far from where;

(iii)   There were doubts as to whether or not a library association really existed in that country.

After lengthy deliberations, the Chairman of the Standing Conference advised the meeting that since one of the guidelines of the Conference is to spread SCECAL in independent countries of the region, and since the applicant had assured the meeting that there was a registered association with competent professional capabilities to host the Conference, it would only be fair for SCECAL to move to the South. This was eventually approved. Those of us who attended the 1980 SCECAL – 4 in Lesotho were overwhelmed with the hospitable capabilities that were accorded to participants. The Maseru Conference established the SCECSAL. Little did "we" know that the standing Conference had been hijacked to the Southern Africa! Since that time, and for more than ten years, the Standing Conference became a monopoly of Library associations in the South. The standing conference was thereafter passed on from one country to the other in the South.

Through out the period, each host association has had the freedom to organize the conference in a style suitable and affordable by itself. For example, they have chosen themes which they have considered appropriate to their requirements. During the period under review, the Standing Conference has discussed a variety of themes covering a wide spectrum of topics in the profession:

1974   Libraries and their impact on education, economics and culture in developing countries. (Tanzania)

1976   Libraries and information services as instruments of transition to the 21st century in Africa. (Zambia)

1978   The development of information systems: an African approach. (Kenya)

1980   Book production and the sharing of resources. (Lesotho)

1982   Libraries for national development. (Malawi)

1984   Information for national development. (Zimbabwe)

1986   Libraries and literacy. (Botswana)

1988   Library and Information Services for disadvantaged groups. (Swaziland)

1990   Bibliographic control in the 1990s and beyond: Strategies for the development of library and information services in East Africa. (Uganda)

1992   Improving access to information and knowledge for socio-economic and technological development in Africa. (Tanzania)

1994   Libraries and Freedom of Information. (Malawi)

1996   Libraries and information services in the 21st century and beyond. (Lesotho)

1998   Information for sustainable development in the 21st century. (Kenya)

Achievements

Below are so me of the achievements made by the Standing conference in the last twenty five years.

(i)   Biennial Conferences

The Standing Conference has regularly held its meetings on rotational basis since 1974 to-date (1988), the SCECSAL can therefore rightfully claim a successful and fruitful period of 25 years.

(ii)   Publication of Conference Proceedings

Throughout this period of 25 years, the Standing Conference has regularly published its conference proceedings, keeping a record of its views and ideas as they have evolved through the period. Although national professional associations in the region have found it hard to maintain regular publishing of their respective national "library" journals like MAKTABA in Kenya, the Standing Conference can be viewed as having bailed all the library associations in the region out by regularly publishing its conference proceedings. This is commendable for all of you who have kept SCECSAL flag flying in this respect.

(iii)   Development of the profession

Since the Standing Conference is hosted by registered information professional associations, as is a requirement, countries wishing to host the

Conference had to form associations as a prerequisite to making applications to host the Standing Conference.

Arising out of this requirement, it can be said that the Standing Conference has been instrumental in assisting information professionals in the region to form associations immediately their national governments achieved political independence. Librarians quickly founded their "Library Associations" in order to be allowed to host the prestigious Standing Conference. Thus, the Standing Conference has been a catalyst in the formation of "Library Associations" in the region.

iv)   The Development of professionalism

Through the regular biennial conferences, individual professionals exchange knowledge and experiences as well as enabling the younger and up-coming professionals to aspire for higher heights in their individual fields of specialization. Arising out of this, majority of the professionals in the region have also obtained higher qualifications.

Having acquired internationally recognized qualifications and capabilities, some of the Standing Conference members have been elected to international organizations, representing the region. To mention but only a few: Kay Raseroka is a member of the prestigious IFLA Executive Board, Stan Made is the Chairman of IFLA's Regional Section for Africa on which Jacinta Were is a member while Peter Weche represents the region on Comla Executive Committee as the COMLA Regional Vice-President, and Musila Musembi is the Secretary of the Joint Committee between librarians and archivists on Conservation (JICPA).

(v)   Relationships amongst the professionals

The Standing Conference has enhanced greater relationships amongst the professionals in the region. It has ensured meetings of information professionals in the region every two years; meetings which have enabled exchange of new ideas, varying views and valuable experiences; understanding amongst the professionals.

(vi)   Enhancement of general knowledge

Through participation in the Standing Conference meetings, majority of the participants have been able to visit new countries of the region to know what the nationals of different countries are like and the environmental conditions of the various countries.

(vii)   Education and Training

Institutions for the education and training of information professionals in the region have, to a large extent, been stimulated by the Standing Conference.

The E.A. School of Librarianship at Makerere University came into being as a result of a resolution passed in 1960 during the biennial conference of the E.A.L.A. Conference. Furthermore, after the dissolution of the E.A.L.A conference in 1972, Kenya and Tanzania were encouraged by the E.A.L.A to set up their own national institutions for education and training of information professionals in their respective countries. As a result, a Department of Library Studies was set up at the Kenya Polytechnic in Kenya and the Tanzania Library Association established their own.

(ix)   Free flow of information

The Standing Conference has enabled free flow of information throughout the region, partly as a result of the Standing Conference proceedings, discussions and also individual information professionals now E-mail, telephone, fax or write to one another as acquaintances, requesting for needed information. The results are very encouraging, especially when compared with what the situation was 25 years ago.

In Kenya, for example, after organizing the E.A.L.A. and the Standing Conference for a number of years, K.L.A. hosted the International Association of Agricultural Librarians and Documentalists (IAALD) in 1983 which held its third conference in Africa, after its inauguration in Nigeria in 1972. Last but not least, K.L.A hosted the 50th conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in 1984. this enabled IFLA to set its foot on the African soil for the first time since its inception in 1927. Thereafter, there was no regional or international conference that was held in Kenya until this week when KLA hosted, for the second time, the thirteenth Standing Conference, exactly twenty years since!!! It is fitting therefore, to say at this point: "*Welcome back home Dear Standing Conference*"

(x)   SCECSAL's Guest of Honour

Throughout the period, a lot of importance has been placed on the caliber of the Guest of Hounour invited to grace the official opening. One of the guidelines for the Standing Conference is to invite a government official, preferably, the Head of State and President of the host country. In Kenya, for example, during the third Standing Conference, K.L.A. invited the President of the Republic of Kenya to officially open the conference. Unfortunately, the President died during the conference week. As a result, opening of the conference was delayed, even though the conference continued with its activities. Later, the government delegated the responsibility to the Minister of Culture and Social Services, who opened and simultaneously closed the conference. Arising out of the invitation however, SCECSAL delegates were accorded the opportunity to visit State House to give their last respect to the late President.

The type and level of the Guest of Honour who SCECSAL invites in itself is an achievement because the guest of honour attracts the interest and attention of the respective countries to libraries and information services during the week and beyond through the various press media.

(xi)   Media coverage

Whenever SCECSAL is held, host associations mobilize all the sectors of the media: newspapers, radio and television to cover the conference activities. Through this, opportunities are given to both the national as well as the visiting information professionals to be interviewed on what they hope to achieve from the Conference. Resulting from these interviews and other coverages, the public is educated on who information professionals are, what they do in the socio-economic and political development of their respective countries. To that end, various institutions in the information field have either been assisted or completely set up a new by their national governments.

(xii)   Conference resolutions

Several resolutions are passed by the Standing Conference. Resolutions are derived from the papers which are presented during the conference week, indicating needy areas which national associations are directed to take action on. For example, National Library Service Boards in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda as well as the E.A.L.A. School of Librarianship at Makerere University were established out of the resolutions which were passed at the E.A.L.A. biennial conference of 1960.

It is not easy however, to quantify the benefits and achievements accrued from the Standing Conference through the resolutions passed since 1974. However, what should be done, is to undertake a study in the region to identify achievements made so far arising from the resolutions passed since its inception. Where no action has been taken, reasons should be sought. Otherwise, resolutions passed at every meeting of the Standing Conference are meant for individual associations to translate them into workable activities and then take up with the respective institutions within their national governments, for assistance to effect them. Stakeholders in SCECSAL are the member library associations and more precisely, officials of the Executive Committee of the various associations. These should be the main players transformation of the profession in the region, by seeing to it that resolutions passed at meetings of the SCECSAL are implemented. These are the people to be blamed when nothing happens.

(xiii)   Unity of information professionals in the region

Since its formation, the Standing Conference evolved unity amongst the individual members of the region. This is evident at conferences like: IFLA, COMLA, FID, ICA and others.   During the voting sessions, for example, SCECSAL members have voted as a block on matters of interest to the region

in general and in particular, those affecting individual countries or members of the region. Used properly, therefore, the region stands to benefit a lot from such unity due to the weight which the Standing Conference has acquired.

Donor's Contribution

The story of the Standing Conference would be incomplete without a mention of the donor agencies and the tremendous valuable contribution which they have availed in the improvement of the profession in the region. The SCECSAL activities could not succeed and the SCECSAL could certainly not achieve its goals had it not been for the assistance it has so far received from the donor agencies.

The British Council was the single instrumental contributor to the successful organizing and attendance of the E.A.L.A. conference from 1960 to 1972. It provided both the return bus fares and maintenance costs of participants at the conference in Dar-es-salaam, Kampala and Nairobi. UNESCO and Rockefeller Foundation also featured.

When the E.A.L.A. evolved into the SCECSAL, however, more donor agencies came into play. Such organizations contributed funds and personnel that enabled successful participation of the Standing Conference meetings. As for DSE, its name became synonymous with the sponsoring of pre and post Standing Conference seminars and workshops throughout the region.

In particular, however, the name of Lutz Hutteman deserves special mention as the SCECSAL commemorates its 25th anniversary. Lutz will be remembered for many years to come throughout the region as a result of the work which DSE did in the region between 1972 and 1998. DSE funded both formal training and continuing education. DSE first operated from Nairobi and later moved to Arusha, Tanzania in the middle of 1980s. Therefore, it is fitting to say a big THANK YOU to DSE at this point.

As one of those that heavily benefited from funding of most of the donor agencies, I would like to thank all of them and further, kindly request them to make a standing commitment in their annual budgets, for the Standing Conference. Such contributions will go along way in facilitating the Standing Conference to effectively promote the profession, and to contribute effectively to the international information flow in one way or another.

The E.A.L.A. was able to organize both formal and informal training of librarians in the E.A. region assisted by donor agencies. Scholarships were given by the British Council during the 1960s through the E.A.L.A. In this way, the professional manpower increased and in turn, strengthened the activities of the Standing Conference in the region in later years. It is the British Council in particular which contributed greatly in the training of information professional in the region. Here again as we celebrate the 25th anniversary,

the British Council deserves another BIG THAN YOU. The professional capacity available in the region now is as a result of the scholarships awarded by the British Council during the period of 1972-1998.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although the Standing Conference is the biggest regional conference of information professionals in Africa there is still much more that needs to be done.

(i)   The Standing Conference should find out why participation by colleagues from: Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan had dwindled. Colleagues from these countries attended the E.A.L.A. conference as well as the earlier meetings of the Standing Conference.   They also feature at IFLA and other international forums.

Appreciably, it is understood that these countries have had perennial political upheavals. All the same, efforts should be made to assist them to join others in the Standing Conference meetings. Perhaps donor agencies could assist in this?

(ii)   On the other hand, colleagues from Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles should not only be encouraged to participate but also be assisted to host the Standing Conference in the near future. Delegates from Mauritius and Seychelles have also attended the earlier SCECSAL meetings. It is high time that SCECSAL "bathed" in the Indian Ocean!

(iii)   As for the two Congo countries and Mozambique, greater efforts should be made to woe them into the Standing Conference fold. Even though they speak Freanch while the official language is SCECSAL is English, there is no shadow of doubt that most of the French speaking colleagues do much better in English than the other way round.

(iv)   Without a proper yardstick, it is hard to say with confidence that SCECSAL has been successful in realizing its set goals as expressed in the various resolutions. A machinery should therefore be set up to monitor the implementation of various resolutions within the region. Players in this exercise should be the institutions of education and training of information professionals, national library and archives departments with the support of donor agencies, in undertaking researches. We need to know whether SCECSAL resolutions are ever achieved.

(v)   Although the Standing Conference has regularly published its conference proceedings, the individual issues are of varying

formats. Libraries which have acquired the issues must be finding it inconvenient to bind A4, A5 etc size of SCECSAL issues. The Standing Conference should prescribe the form in which the SCECSAL proceedings should be published in order to create uniformity in size and colour. Furthermore, the Standing Conference should make it a rule that each host association should submit a copy of its SCECSAL proceedings, to an indexing journal to enable wide sharing of knowledge and ideas.

(vi)   In the absence of strong and regular funding, the only way SCECSAL can run successfully is along the lines it has been organized since 1974.   Each host association has the freedom and full powers to organize and run the conference. In which case, host associations should still decide on the theme of the conference since they are the ones who know what they wish to benefit from the conference.

(vii) The name of the Standing Conference as it stands, suggests that it is a conference of librarians only. This name should be changed to: "The Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Information Professionals" (SCECSAIP) in order to include other information professionals in the field of: Archives, Bibliography, Documentation, Information Technology and Librarianship to name, but only a few.

(viii) The Standing Conference has effective representation on COMLA and IFLA. More efforts should be made for it to work very closely with other international organizations like FID, IAALD, IATUL, ICA to mention only these few.

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