SCECSAL

16TH STANDING CONFERENCE OF EASTERN, CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA LIBRARY AND INFORMATION ASSOCIATIONS (SCECSAL XVI)

A Report Prepared by

Dr. R. Ikoja-Odongo
Conference Rapporteur

UGANDA hosted the 16th Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa Library and Information Associations (SCECSAL XVI) from the 5th to the 9th July 2004. The Conference whose theme, "Towards a knowledge society for African development", attracted participants from Africa and beyond. During the Conference several Conference related activities including the pre conference meetings of the Standing Conference of the African National and University Libraries (SCANUL-EC) followed by Library Educators Network meeting (LISNET) also took place.

The main Conference opened by the Third Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Public Service, Republic of Uganda Hon. Henry Kajura, and closed by the Minister of State for Education Republic of Uganda Hon. Geraldine Namirembe Bitamazire took place at the Kampala International Conference Centre. Distinguished participants included Mrs Kay Raseroka, the IFLA president and Prof. Uta. Chairperson COMLA.

The Conference witnessed presentations of papers in the plenary, and reactions to these papers. Delegates enjoyed tours in and around Kampala environs and outside Kampala. Delegates were also hosted to the Kampala SCECSAL cultural night. There were workshops and exhibitions. Workshops discussed various themes including the Emerging issues in Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) for the African Information Society, Decision makers Training Workshop; Global health and the archive: lessons from the past to inform decision making and the COMLA regional meeting. The British Council organized the Management Forum. Exhibitors included WiderNet Project, Infovision, Blackwell's Book Services, EBSCO Information Services, NISC Information Resource Network, Law Africa Publishing Ltd, The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), TEEAL Africa, CAB International and SMI (Distribution Services) Ltd. The National Book Week Festival held at the City Square coincided with the Conference.

In all the Conference presented nineteen (19) papers covering nine (9) sub themes. The themes included: from indigenous to modern knowledge systems; bridging the digital divide; knowledge management; knowledge economy; information, governance and civil society; information for health care; information and the disadvantaged; information and gender, and education and training.

The aims of the Conference were to: discuss the future of information and knowledge provision and share experiences of best practices for replication in countries lagging behind, build up a consensus on intergovernmental initiatives at a pan-African and regional level and make recommendations concerning information and knowledge dissemination and use through information systems and networks, and to lay strategies to lobby governments to develop public information systems as a priority area for the development of education for all and life long learning.

To achieve those objectives and move Africa to knowledge society the Conference needed spelling out critical areas to act up on. What needed to be done and how should this be done? Who should do it? Where and how do librarians fit in? And what should or must be present to kick start the process? From the presentations, it came to light that Africa needed tools, resources (human and material), active information users, well- resourced information institutions and the enabling environment.

Explained more Africa needed:

1. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

It was realized that:

- Countries in the SCECSAL region and information institutions in particular had fragile and weak ICT infrastructure for capturing, processing, networking and disseminating information.
- Information literacy especially ICT related literacy was low among information users, among LIS students or the educated or even among the information professionals.
- Capacity building was on going in library schools but not strong enough to perform to the required standard of expectation.
- Integration of ICT into information services was very slow and quite insignificant. In many institutions, the planners did not see integration of ICT into the services as a priority.

- Standardization of operating procedures had been slow or not done. Each information institution either within the country or with others outside the country acted individually.
- Information professionals have not fully participated in formulating information related policies including ICT policies in their own countries. In most cases they are merely recipients of policies affecting them.

2. Education and training of information professionals

On resources it was highlighted that it is the central role of information professionals to translate the ideal of the Conference theme into reality. It was also noted that it was the role of the Library schools to produce information professionals with adequate knowledge and skills. It was felt that:

- Library schools curricula was not inclusive of information demands of emerging African society
- Library schools curricula was largely theoretical, it did not put much emphasis on hands on experience.
- Digital divide was actually widening due partly to lack of skills

It was therefore necessary that:

- Library schools should pay attention to curriculum relevance
- Library schools should bridge the gap between theory and practice
- More emphasis should be put to inculcating ICT competencies to students
- Adequate LIS education should be provided
- Module on digital libraries should be incorporated in the curricula
- Continuing education programme should be included in the LIS curricula
- Community outreach services be strengthened so as to serve the marginalized

3. Information provision

The Conference acknowledged that there are many people in African communities that remained outside information services and yet their contribution to society was great. Mothers, especially rural mothers, rural populations generally, artisans, fisher folks, slum dwellers etc were singled as some of those who are disadvantaged and not served. The Conference urged the information professionals to:

- Adopt appropriate methods to include those disadvantaged into information services.

- Engage in repackaging of relevant information in the languages used and/known and formats acceptable to the disadvantaged people and get information to these people.
- Make effort to spread out information services to the rural areas through Rural Library Services as a means of bridging the information divide within our societies themselves.
- Cater for businesspersons through the establishment of Business Information Services.

4. Enabling environment

It was noted that Information professional in Africa are basically recipients of policies they never participate in formulating. At the same time they would be the same people to complain that information institutions are marginalized and not sufficiently catered for in the plans of government or institutions they fall in. Urgent need was felt that:

- It is high time African Information professionals' proactively participated in matters of policy making on issues that affect them and their information institutions.
- Peace was noted as essential element for development and use of information services. Information professionals should use this climate to advocate for the importance of information and lobby for information institutions among governments in their respective countries.
- Development of information institutions is the task of governments, private sector and supported by well-wishers. Information professionals were urged to exploit available avenues to convince all stakeholders to support information activities.
- Information professionals seek for funds from wherever possible to implement information activities.
- Information professionals should commit themselves to providing information services selflessly to all.
- Friendship with similar organizations out of the region could be developed.

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