

2000 Carnegie Challenge



CARNEGIE
CORPORATION
of NEW YORK

***Revitalizing African
Libraries: The Challenge
of a Quiet Crisis***

Few might consider books and their availability to be a top agenda item for Africa when the continent faces the enormous pressures of poverty, war, famine and AIDS. But in a global economy that is increasingly centered on access to knowledge and information, books continue to be a critical key to solving a nation's problems and learning remains a critical element in a nation's arsenal of strategies for survival.

At the beginning of the last century, Carnegie Corporation of New York was instrumental in spreading the importance of the book and the influence of libraries through the American community and countries that were part of the former British Commonwealth. The Corporation was carrying out the mandate of its founder, Andrew Carnegie, who was committed to the idea that individuals can progress if they can share in the stored knowledge of history and understand the ever-changing developments of their own time. The power of that idea is still fresh, and now, at the beginning of a new century, the Corporation believes that the importance of books and libraries in the life of nations and their people resonates just as strongly in Africa. But Africa's libraries, under-resourced and under-utilized, are facing a crisis that, though seemingly quiet, has the potential to affect the continent's intellectual capital for decades to come.

With this in mind, Carnegie Corporation of New York brought together some 25 international donors and librarians (see list of participants, page

8) to explore issues of literacy, information technology and access to global knowledge as they relate to African public and university libraries. The two days of discussion, May 11-12, 2000, contained an urgency informed by the desire to help ensure that the continent is not left behind in the information revolution as it was in the industrial revolution. The goal of the conference was also to create partnerships among donors with regard to public libraries in Africa and to define a platform on which future consortiums and agendas can be built.

Participants discussed challenges that range from the fundamental but intangible need to engender a love of reading to management practices, librarian training, funding and the integration of information technology. Ideas that emerged create a vision of future libraries that depart significantly from current models designed by British and American colonial powers, models now crippled by a lack of funds, leadership, vision and political clout. Libraries of the future will instead provide innovative and self-sustaining services designed to meet the particular needs of local populations, 80 percent of which are still rural. In addition, they will address a wide range of information needs, from books and lectures, audio recordings and Braille, film and computer capabilities.

Many of the issues raised at the conference stem from the far-reaching and endemic problems summarized in a report entitled *Public Libraries in Africa*, published by the International Network for

the Availability of Scientific Publications. Based on literature published from 1994-1999 in 10 countries—Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe—the report depicts a trend of declining budgets and failures due to a variety of factors including a lack of definition of the role of libraries, declining governmental support, uncoordinated development and a weak publishing industry. But it also makes note of achievements in alternative services, many of which were also highlighted during the conference.

Background

Half a century ago, currencies and economic growth were strong but literacy for native Africans was not a priority for the governments of many countries. Libraries were built for and managed by people whose knowledge was imported from Britain and America. But because they were designed without real consideration of the continent or the information needs of African people, these libraries addressed the needs of only a small population of users. During independence, libraries enjoyed strong donor support and were planned with considerable idealism and enthusiasm, but little remains of the investments made at that time.

The collapse of Eastern Europe during the past decade created a competition for resources from the West. Economic crises and catastrophes on the African continent pushed libraries, which in most cases only served a scant three percent of the population, further to the periphery of governmental

concern. Although international organizations have continued to fund libraries, investments made over the last quarter century by donor organizations have shown little return. Many public libraries, whose primary resource is textbooks, are de facto school libraries, surviving only because of school-children who can find needed books nowhere else or who use them as quiet places to study. In addition, libraries don't always meet the needs of recipients, who have not historically been involved in planning the library services they receive. Other obstacles affecting the development of library services include the continent's approximately 2,000 languages and dialects, as well as poorly developed transportation and communications infrastructures that limit access.

As one participant noted, the whole concept of libraries on the local level needs redefining. The Camel Library Service, which was launched by the Kenya National Library Service in 1996 and uses camels to carry textbooks and other materials to nomadic populations beyond the reach of traditional library structures, demonstrates that such services need not be restricted to fixed places or "traditional" delivery methods.

Sustainability

The pivotal idea to which conference participants returned again and again was that of sustainability. External funding establishes a condition of dependency that has historically led projects to wither when donated resources are depleted. In light of this, participants emphasized the need for future

projects to be financially and operationally self-sustaining, managed by librarians who have the training and authority to develop services created in response to local constituencies. To become self-sustaining, library initiatives need to be funded by partnerships between donors, government agencies, regional and local organizations and run on a cost-sharing basis.

In addition, sustainable libraries need to be developed as a vital part of, and contribute to a country's infrastructure, from the top down as well as the bottom up.

A Critical Step: Establishing a Reading Culture

Although African culture is primarily oral, most public libraries are based on the premise of print as the medium for exchanging information. The development of a reading culture, however, has been inhibited by inaccessible and expensive reading materials, often published in the wrong language about irrelevant subjects. There has also been tension between the need to nourish and sustain Africa's oral traditions while building a reading culture that can go hand-in-hand with—not replace—the spoken word.

One conference participant offered a number of solutions, including creating libraries that are accessible to the majority of people, libraries designed to respond to and reflect the larger culture as it exists, rather than just the elite population that contributes to their development.

Libraries also need to be redefined as places that provide access to information and knowledge, in whatever form, such as public forums that would help preserve and extend oral traditions.

Perhaps key to establishing a reading culture is the need to engender the love of reading for pleasure in librarians who can, in turn, spread that dynamic to their constituents. One meeting participant stressed people's desire for quality books that reflect their culture, that such reading material will help strengthen the book chain of authors, illustrators and publishers. Many participants expressed the feeling that this is critical to any program that extends the reach of libraries beyond the small percentage of the population for whom they are currently accessible.

More than one conference participant cautioned against seeing provision of books as a goal, but rather as one of the means of disseminating information. Others, however, acknowledged that strengthening the African publishing industry is critical to closing the literacy divide. Books published in indigenous languages and about subjects that are useful to local needs can serve as instruments of development. The call to strengthen native publishing industries and promote a culture of learning includes connecting authors, editors, librarians, communities and bookstores.

Training

Excessively centralized management and a pervasive lack of professionally trained human resources

led conference participants to question the wisdom of conventional, largely foreign-based library science training programs. Despite the demand for professionally trained library staff, dwindling numbers of students are enrolling in both domestic and foreign programs. Lack of financial incentives and cultural context along with professional marginalization and outdated curriculums are among the factors contributing to the lack of interest in traditional library science programs.

As an alternative, several participants offered visions of locally developed short course or in-service training programs delivered by local experts. Such programs could develop into networks stretching from country to country, enabling a sharing and exchange of skills. The profession could, in addition, be strengthened and supported by cooperation between neighboring countries, with colleagues from other public and university libraries as well as across other professions. This kind of international cooperation, of which the Carnegie Corporation conference was cited as an example, could also lead to the adaptation and duplication of successful programs, as well as increase the stability of the profession which would help redress the imbalance of resources between university and public libraries.

Key to this vision is professional independence in relation to management decisions and the need for librarians to understand the importance of public relations in promoting the value of their work. In Botswana and Kenya, where such library programs

as Village Reading Rooms and the Camel Library Service have flourished, public education efforts have included creation and advertisement of National Book Week, use of local media to advertise library events, participation of national authorities in events, tee shirts and community involvement, such as donations of structures. And the drive to expand the constituencies for libraries has led their supporters not only to reach out to government policymakers but to generate activities and initiatives that encourage community participation, including publicizing resources for people with special needs, such as the visually impaired, those with other physical handicaps and/or individuals with HIV and AIDS.

University Libraries

University libraries suffer from many of the same problems found in public libraries, as well as some specific to their role within institutions of higher education. Much of the discussion in this area stemmed from findings reported in *University Libraries in Africa: A Review of Their Current State and Future Potential*, a two-year study of 18 university libraries in 11 sub-Saharan African countries, published in 1997 by the International Africa Institute. One of the trends cited in the report—and that conference participants came back to time and again—was the loss of faith on the part of students, teachers and academic leaders in university libraries. The problem is one that seems to feed on itself: in past years, as university libraries failed to meet the needs of academics, in part because of a lack of funds, a failure to anticipate future needs

and to keep pace with technology, their constituencies turned to their own departments and to faculty libraries for needed resources. Now, main university libraries have, in many instances, become marginalized in the academic community and are not seen as a center of learning to be enhanced and expanded.

There are other factors, too, that have led to the diminished stature of university libraries, including teaching methods that center on classroom learning rather than independent research (often a central purpose of a vital, growing library) and access to electronic resources such as the Internet and CD-ROMs that make decentralized information retrieval easier. Additional trends cited by conference participants as having led to university library decline include:

- A breakdown of physical facilities
- Failure to keep pace with expanding enrollment
- Inadequate collections
- Increasing dependence upon donor support
- Poor communications between librarians and their users, between librarians and university administrators and among librarians nationally and internationally
- Lack of management strategies

And as with their public counterparts, the problem of sustainability is one of the critical issues facing university libraries. Conference participants expressed the need for university libraries to move from traditional reliance on external funding such as donor and government support, especially in the area of information and communication technolo-

gies (ICTs), to self-generating funds and other alternative funding sources.

Although largely supported by donor funding and not yet linked to national, regional or global knowledge networks, the introduction and extension of ICT in most African university libraries through university-wide networks and the Internet, is an important step forward. Other positive developments include the growth of regional professional associations such as the Standing Conference of African National and Academic Librarians in East, Central and Southern Africa (SCANAL-ECS) which has focused on the question of “why libraries,” and on finance, sustainability and communications issues. In addition, an agenda developed by the Association of African Universities (AAU) promotes ICT adoption and the establishment of a clearinghouse for the dissemination of information concerning library management.

Although there is no lack of professionally trained librarians in university libraries, conference participants voiced concern over a scarcity of knowledge and skills in such areas as financial management, income generation and advocacy, as well as ICT. Appropriate application of ICT can also be used to strengthen and expand both locally generated content in the form of scholarly papers (gray literature) and access to international cultural literacy.

Many specific recommendations for developing the capacity and effectiveness of university libraries—both as the providers and recipients of services—

were offered by conference participants, but all hinged upon the central theme of redefining libraries as repositories of information resources that are central to day-to-day learning. This would mean expanding access to and use of technology, but also widening the pool of library resources to adapt to an international flow of information as well as developing a knowledge storehouse specifically relevant to university programs.

Technology

Although basic forms of ICT, such as CD-ROMs, e-mail and the Internet, have been widely instituted in university libraries, these innovations don't have wide impact on the public because university libraries are not viewed as technology centers that serve or are available to the general population. Outside of the university setting, e-mail capability is less than a decade old and Internet connectivity a mere five years old. Although nearly every capital city has Internet capability, there are still many areas of the continent where basic telephone and electrical services are unreachable or unreliable.

Within this framework, discussions about how to integrate technology with other library services spun on both philosophical and practical considerations involving the development of technological and regulatory infrastructures, accessibility, training, cost, licensing, connectivity, integration with local information-producing services and the role of librarians in determining the outcomes of these issues.

According to a report published by the African Development Forum of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the implementation of ICT can profoundly affect economic and social resources in a variety of ways, including:

- Reducing poverty by creating a more skilled work force
- Providing basic needs by improving the delivery of such services as healthcare, education, agricultural productivity and commerce
- Improving public administration
- Enhancing democratization and citizen empowerment

However, the barriers to successful implementation of ICT in Africa are numerous. They range from the need to overcome low levels of literacy to adequate physical and regulatory infrastructures, accessible sites in remote areas and content that is relevant, affordable and available in local languages.

The Challenge: Beyond the Conference

The subject of revitalizing African libraries may be one that, at least for now, engenders more questions than answers, but there are a number of rich and urgent ideas to consider. As participants in the Carnegie Corporation meeting noted, while there certainly are strengths in existing African library systems, much needs to be done, including upgrading staff skills, strengthening library infrastructures and capacity, reforming policies, offering training on an ongoing basis and helping local libraries become learning and communication centers for their communities.

But perhaps the largest and most important challenge highlighted by conference participants is the need to develop a true partnership between donors and African leaders who can identify strategies that will point the way toward revitalizing both public and university libraries. Ideas must come from those receiving services, not those providing them, and the impetus for change must be spurred on by library supporters who have the will to bring these issues to the attention of all who can help, from local community organizations to national governments so that, in the long-term, the vitality of African libraries is not dependent upon outside funders. To encourage this process, staff members of Carnegie Corporation's International Development Program proposed that conference participants serve as a core group devoted to keeping the conversation about the revitalization of Africa libraries alive and continually updated.

The Corporation sees its contribution to the future of African library systems centering on helping to develop models that will serve to test ideas and offer concrete examples of what works and what can be replicated on a local, regional and even national level. This emphasis is firmly rooted in Carnegie Corporation's long history of supporting catalytic work that spurs on dialogue and stimulates the community of strategists who can offer new thinking and point to new directions for rejuvenating not only institutions but also the communities they serve. This focus seems particularly appropriate in relationship to libraries for, as Andrew Carnegie once observed: "I believe that [a

library] outranks any other one thing that a community can do to help its people. It is the never failing spring in the desert."

In closing, Vartan Gregorian, the president of the Carnegie Corporation, revisited remarks he first made in a 1998 essay on Libraries and Andrew Carnegie's Challenge. "Libraries," president Gregorian noted, "contain the heritage of humanity: the record of its triumphs and failures, its intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements and its collective memory. It would be a true tragedy," he continued, "if that record did not serve and include African countries at the highest level possible." To meet this goal, he urged coordination, cooperation and extreme honesty as conference participants, unconstrained by time, space or distance, continue to work together to disseminate the messages of the conference and build a movement that will launch African literacy into the 21st century.

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