NATIONAL INFORMATION AND INFORMATICS POLICIES IN AFRICA

REPORT AND PROCEEDINGS
OF A REGIONAL SEMINAR
HELD IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA
28 NOVEMBER – 1 DECEMBER 1988
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NATIONAL INFORMATION AND INFORMATICS POLICIES IN AFRICA
Report and Proceedings of a Regional Seminar

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
28 November - 1 December 1988

International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
&
Pan African Documentation and Information System (PADIS)

Shahid Akhtar
Editor

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MALAWI: NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY

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A. INTRODUCTION

To the question: "Does Malawi have a national information/informatics policy?", the answer has to be "Yes" and "No". The ambivalent response is not an easy way out of a difficult query but an accurate rejoinder to a persistent problem. The rather hazy picture becomes clear as we examine Malawi's efforts at formulating a National Information Policy.

The formation of the Malawi Library Association (MALA) in 1976, and its inauguration a year later, ushered in a new consciousness among the small circle of professionals in the country. UNESCO [1] took the initiative, in 1974, to encourage member states to harmonize their documentation, library and archives services into one national information system (NATIS) capable of facilitating the process of socio-economic development. Following this initiative, the newly created Malawi Library Association held that the formation of one functional nation-wide information service would contribute to a lasting foundation for the country's development.

B. ROLE OF THE NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

The National Research Council in the Office of the President and Cabinet was identified as the competent organ of Government which possessed the instruments for piloting the country's disparate information resources on the path to a unified system. As early as March 1977, MALA submitted to the Council a document explaining the NATIS concept and its relevance to Malawi and asking the Council to coordinate all actions which may have to be taken to achieve the NATIS objectives. The Council, sitting at its 11th Meeting, concluded that the NATIS philosophy was worth pursuing and encouraged the creation of appropriate mechanisms to oversee its development.

A preliminary meeting was held on July 13th, 1978 which recommended the creation of a National Documentation and Information Committee, to comprise representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, University of Malawi, the National Library Service, the National Archives of Malawi, the Malawi Bureau of Standards and the National Research Council.

C. CONSULTANCY MISSIONS

The second stage in the development of Malawi's information policy relates to surveys which may be wholly credited to neither the National Documentation Information Committee nor the Malawi Library Association, although both organizations were involved in the analysis of their findings. In the arena of information, the government saw the need for immediate action and it was felt that this could be implemented through
a National Documentation Centre. The novelty of documentation centres in Southern Africa and the lack of finished examples to provide general guidance, lead to expert advice being sought from elsewhere.

In late 1980, under UNDP preparatory assistance, Mrs. Antoinette David of France and Mr. Stephen Massil of Britain carried out a combined feasibility study on the establishment of a National Documentation Centre. Mrs. David examined the information services and needs in the business, industrial and commercial fields, including intermediate and appropriate technology, and new and renewable energy. Mr. Massil focused on economic, social and political information. Under the same project preparation exercise, a UNESCO mission was conducted in 1979 by Mr. Michael Roper of the Public Record Office, London, on the establishment of a Central Microfilming Unit to be attached to the National Documentation Centre.

The three resultant reports offered some divergent recommendations and put forward for consideration some programme suggestions which seemed utopian. But there was a strand of agreement that Malawi was rich in documentary resources and needed a central coordinating agency to channel them and to help Malawians exploit information for development. All three reports discussed the problems of storage, retrieval and exchange of information which, in Malawi, were aggravated by the scattering of documents - especially in the country's commercial, academic and administrative centres.

Having extensively examined the three reports, Government officials agreed that:

a) A National Documentation Centre should be established within the framework of the National Documentation and Information System.

b) A Central Microfilming Unit should be created as an affiliate of the system, but be operated by the National Archives of Malawi because of the centrality and unique nature of Government records.

Fortunately for Malawi, the consultancy reports were not relegated to shelves in some dusty and overcrowded registry. A project document was culled from the recommendations and has been submitted to donors. At the time of writing, it would seem that UNDP is considering to help Malawi establish a National Documentation Centre and Central Microfilming Bureau.

If funds are secured it will be possible to launch a programme which can provide an information network for meeting the information needs of Government departments and ministries, statutory organizations and the private sector, while also paying special attention to the specific information needs of decision-makers, the agricultural sector and industry. In addition, the introduction of micro-photographic services will facilitate resource-sharing and document preservation.
D. POLICY INITIATIVES

The third stage in Malawi's information development is perhaps the most dramatic as it pertains to efforts which address the policy problem itself. In March 1987, the Documentation and Information Services Committee organized a Seminar on "National Policy on Library and Information Services" under UNESCO sponsorship and with the collaboration of the Malawi National Library Service. Although the Committee had met several times in the past to discuss NATIS-related issues, this was the first time a major seminar had focused on development of an official policy to guide implementation of a National Documentation Centre.

The objectives of the seminar were three-fold:

a) To draw the attention of government to the need for a National Policy on Library, Documentation and Information Services in Malawi.

b) To sensitize all agencies in Malawi involved in or concerned with the collection, processing, dissemination and use of documentary information, about the need for a National Policy as the basis for planning and effective co-ordination of information activities, and assign the responsibilities for ensuring the provision of information services.

c) To lay the foundation and initiate the procedures for the formulation of a National Policy [2].

The Seminar resolved that the main goal of Malawi's National Policy should be the achievement of optimal utilization of the information and professional knowledge generated and available in the country or abroad as a planning, decision-making and problem-solving resource.

For purposes of easy implementation by the Government five elements of the National Policy were articulated as follows:

a) Development of Information Manpower

It shall be government policy to promote and support the training of information workers of all categories (Librarians, Archivists and Documentalists) to meet the country's manpower needs, and to give appropriate professional status, recognition, incentives and professional development opportunities for the effective management of the country's library and information services.
b) **Generation and Collection of Information Resources**

It shall be government policy to strengthen the generation of indigenous information and publishing activities through widening the number, range, types, coverage, and by better quality of information materials, and by intensifying the collection of information available locally and abroad.

c) **Organization, storage and retrieval of information**

It shall be government policy to provide a full range of information services and information and documentation delivery mechanisms appropriate to different user groups, promote efficient methods of resource management and stimulate optimal utilization of emerging information technologies to ensure that information services are cost effective.

d) **Effective access to and utilization of information**

It shall be government policy to ensure that people of all categories and in all localities have easy access to a wide range of information sources through the development of information networks, resource-sharing programmes, and the perception of users regarding the value and utility of information and its application to planning, decision-making and problem solving processes.

e) **Co-ordination of library and information services**

It shall be government policy to evolve a national co-ordinating mechanism to ensure effective and optimal implementation of the national policy on libraries and information services, projects and programmes in the country, in order to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort and avoid waste of resources in the national information system development and operation.

The Policy Document has now been submitted to the National Research Council for official endorsement by Government.

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E. INFORMATION LEGISLATION

The past decade has seen a flurry of activity in legislative reform.

The old National Archives Act was abolished and a new one promulgated in 1976, giving wider powers to the Government Archivist in the collection and protection of public archives, modern records and historical manuscripts. The National Archives of Malawi is also the
country's only legal deposit library. A couple of years ago, consideration was given to revising or repealing the Printed Publications Act of 1947. A new draft law has been submitted to the Government and, when enacted later this year, it will close all loopholes in the old legislation and allow for the extension of legal deposit to new literary forms and media as they are produced. It will also permit the University Library System and the National Library Service to enjoy legal deposit so that as many readers as possible are exposed to the nation's literature.

The present Copyright Act with its 18 meagre sections has serious shortcomings, among which is the lack of a designated responsible Minister. Nor does it recognize the various forms of artistic endeavour and the importance of rights as understood by both UNESCO and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Here, too, a Copyright Committee was created at the instigation of the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO sponsored National Workshop on Copyright, which was held in Zomba from April 1-4, 1985. A new mammoth Act, with 51 comprehensive sections dealing with the protection of publications, performing and artistic arts, broadcasts and expressions of folklore, is in the making.

The National Library Service Act was passed by parliament in 1967 and it carried a provision for a National Library Service Board with powers to "promote, establish, equip, maintain and develop Libraries in Malawi" [3]. From the phenomenal growth of public library services in Malawi, it would seem that the provisions of the Act are adequate for Malawi's needs.

F. INFORMATION INSTITUTIONS

The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for the development of the Government and Statutory organizations which run library and information services: the National Library Service, the University of Malawi, the National Archives of Malawi and, of course, the many schools and colleges scattered throughout Malawi. Other Ministries are responsible for their own libraries/information units, e.g., the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Forestry and Natural Resources, Office of the President and Cabinet, to mention only a few.

The large libraries are well stocked and staffed but in the stiff competition for funds, small departmental information units suffer from under-staffing and poor budgetary allocation. In their totality, however, they play meaningful roles defined for them by the needs of their constituents. Much credit is owed to the Malawi Library Association for:

a) Uniting all persons and organizations engaged in library, archives, documentation and information work in the country.
b) Establishing, as early as 1979, an annual training programme leading to the award of the Malawi Library Assistants Certificate.

Some co-ordination is done on an ad hoc basis by the National Documentation and Information Committee, but the Committee's contribution will be felt when it receives added powers and responsibility within the National Policy framework.

G. LINKAGES WITH INFORMATICS POLICIES

Informatics is a new field in Malawi and its development depends on the initiative of management in specific institutions. This, in turn, depends on appropriate support from their parent organizations. For the sake of standardization, it is possible that a unified information and informatics policy will be formulated in the near future. The only fear is that this might not happen quickly enough, as change in the informatics environment is so dramatic and fast.

H. ROLE OF PLANNERS AND POLICY-MAKERS

Planners and decision-makers are not averse to the formulation of a national Information Policy. One may call attention again to the developments cited in the first section of this paper, coupled by the several workshops and seminars which have been organized at the highest official level. The Government has gone to some length in re-defining and revising appropriate legislation.

I. FINANCING

a) Domestic

Libraries and information services throughout the world enjoy support that is usually characterized as poor to fair. In Third World countries, such services have to fight for a place on the Governments' priority listing and they tend to lose because of their inability to generate income or because of the intensity of other projects in Health, Agriculture, etc.

In Malawi, however, it has been found out that funding increases according to the degree that responsible officers have been educated to recognise the need and importance of such services. And it behooves every librarian and information scientist to wage an unrelentless battle to convince his/her authorities of the vitality and indispensability of information in the development of citizens and national institutions.
b) External

The important role played by foreign aid in creating conditions amidst which NATIS seems possible has been mentioned already. So too has the inordinate length of time covered by the three major steps in policy development. The main task lies ahead, and Malawi will be grateful for external assistance in the form of human resources or funding for the following projects:

i. National Workshop on Informatics Policy - to discuss the nature of the problem, to define the policy in the context of a unified national information/informatics policy.

ii. Survey of information needs of Malawians and of the manpower requirement and training needs of the existing information resources.

iii. Compilation of a Union List of Periodicals - to act as a major tool for resource-sharing.

iv. Launching the National Documentation Centre and the Central Microfilming Bureau - experts to launch these services and train counterpart staff and technicians in operating them.

v. Funding to correct weaknesses in collection development and to strengthen existing institutions e.g., building specialist collections, acquiring reprographic equipment and stationery, media and computer hardware and library software for the key institutions in the country.

J. CONCLUSION

To the extent that individual legislative frameworks, supported by funding and staffing, exist in Malawi, one could argue that information policies exist. These pieces of legislation have made it possible for institutions such as the National Library Service, the University, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Malawi Bureau of Standards and others to offer meaningful information services to their patrons. Malawi's present policy is therefore the sum total of policies of the various institutions who try to do something on their own, within the limits of the available parental support.

But the real national policy which will provide for systematic and centralized direction in the context of this Seminar remains to be ratified by the Government. This target is in sight of realization.
K. REFERENCES

