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THE AFRICAN INFORMATION SOCIETY INITIATIVE (AIS) :
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES
FOR AFRICA'S LIBRARIES

Paper Presented

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at the

IFLA INTERNET - AWARENESS RAISING SEMINAR

FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA

Pretoria, University of South Africa Library,

10-12 July 1997

THE AFRICAN INFORMATION SOCIETY INITIATIVE (AIS): OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR AFRICA'S LIBRARIES.

*"Africa should not miss out on development opportunities presented by the information revolution..... AISI presents the chance for Africa to leap forward and join the global information society for the social and economic empowerment it can bring."*¹

INTRODUCTION

Over the last couple of years, there has been much activity evolving around the development of an African Information Society. The progress towards this development has indeed caused many an eyebrow to be raised and many have countered developments in informatics in Africa by pointing out that "Africa's information infrastructure is by far the least developed in the world. Technical statistics consistently shows that Africans have the smallest number of telephone lines per capita, the most restricted access to computer equipment, the most primitive information networks, and the most inaccessible media systems."² In essence, we have been told that in promoting the development of AISI, we are only creating elitist information and communication infrastructures which will only further isolate Africa's rural areas (the majority) from those African capitals and cities which, though in the minority, have linkages and connections to global information and telecommunications resources and infrastructures. We have also been accused of not doing anything much to assist the disenfranchized and deprived communities in Africa with information which could elevate the status of Africa's people. Given all the various assertions and claims, it is appropriate to provide some background information about the AISI.

THE AFRICAN INFORMATION SOCIETY INITIATIVE (AIS). WHAT IS IT?

"The African Information Society Initiative aims at supporting and accelerating socio-economic development across the region. Driven by critical development imperatives, it focuses on priority strategies, programmes and projects which can assist in the sustainable build up of an information society in African countries in accordance with the regional integration goals of the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community which foresaw the necessity of information networks and of regional databases, information sources and skills capacities."³

(a) **The Mandate**

In May 1995, at the twenty first meeting of the Economic Commission for Africa(ECA) the Conference of Ministers responsible for Economic and Social Development and Planning, adopted resolution 795(XXX) entitled "Building Africa's Information Highway" calling for work on national information and communication networks for planning and decision-making as part of Africa's information highway for the exchange of experiences. This led to the establishment of a High-Level Working Group (HLWG) to develop a plan of action to enable Africa to leap-frog in the information age. The plan of action prepared by the HLWG entitled "the African Information Society Initiative" (AISI): an action framework to build Africa's information and communication infrastructure" was subsequently approved in principle by the twenty second meeting of the ECA Conference of Ministers in its resolution 812(XXXI) in May 1996.⁴

(b) **The Vision**

The AISI action framework articulates a vision which is expected to be realized by the year 2010 for an African sustainable information society. The highlights of this vision are spelt out in paragraph 18 of the AISI action framework.⁵

(c) **Historical Progress**

The historical progress of AISI has been phenomenal in that it has been endorsed by all the major governmental and ministerial fora in Africa starting from its endorsement by ECA Conferences of Ministers in 1995 and 1996 (resolutions 795(XXX) and 812(XXXI) respectively); endorsement by the African Regional Telecommunications Development Conference in 1996; and culminating in further endorsement by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) at its summit meeting in July 1996. When it was formally inaugurated in Midrand, South Africa in May 1996 at the Information Society and Development (ISAD) Conference and the Global Information Infrastructure Commission (GIIC) Information Society Luncheon Forum, the AISI indeed reached a high point in promotion and awareness raising. Indeed, at the recent summit of the G8 developed countries at Denver, Colorado in the USA, the Initiative came up for mention, as indeed at the recent Global Knowledge '97 Conference held in Toronto, Canada from 22-25 June, under the auspices of the World Bank

and the Government of Canada. The ECA featured highly at the Global Conference where it also exhibited publications and promoted the AISI.

(d) **Partnership**

The list of partners interested and committed to supporting the implementation of the strategies and action plans of the AISI is not only impressive but also increasing. Partners include the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization(UNESCO), the International Development Research Centre(IDRC), the International Telecommunication Union(ITU), Bellanet and many others representing both the public and the private sectors.

(e) **National Level Activities**

Funds are being actively mobilized and member States are being encouraged to organize workshops to elaborate national information and communication policy and plans to implement AISI at the national level. The recent workshop held by the ECA and the United Republic of Tanzania in May 1997 on the elaboration of an AISI national policy and plan for Tanzania bears ample testimony to the growing interest and demand for AISI-related activities at the national level.

WHAT ROLE LIBRARIES ?

From the foregoing information about the AISI, it is obvious that many an exciting development has already taken place and others are projected for the future. As the Executive Secretary of the ECA pointed out in the opening remarks in the GIIC Report on the Global Information Society and Development Forum, "The ECA is very serious about the development of an Information Society in Africa, and we intend to remain active as the African continent considers its future in informatics. We look forward to the day when Africa and the developing world are full participants in the Global Information Society..."⁶ So important is the AISI to ECA that the implementation of the AISI has become the core of the work programme of the Development Information Services Division(DISD), one of the five new substantive programme divisions, whose theme is "harnessing information for development". As you must be aware, the AISI is complementary to the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on African priority area on "Harnessing Information

Technology for Development (HITD)" which was created to build the necessary infrastructure for the construction of the African Information Society.

The Development Information Services Division (DISD), within which the Library of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) is located, perceives libraries and librarians as being pillars on which the AISI can be buttressed. In the AISI framework document,⁷ the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in enhancing the successful implementation of the AISI is so amplified throughout the document that one might be mistaken to conclude that there is no role for other information/knowledge channels to assist AISI in attaining a sustainable information society in Africa. But to link Africa to the rest of the world, it becomes imperative to examine and consider all available channels and means. Africa desires connectivity to the world information resources and it is becoming increasingly clear that for such a development to be relevant and realistic, Africa must also be able to find information from Africa. "Africa must be involved in content creation or the development of 'infostructure'. African countries need to organize information for electronic access and dissemination....."⁸ It is against this background that libraries and librarians become relevant in the roles they could assume to facilitate the implementation of the AISI, particularly at the national level.

As Crawford and Gorman articulate in their book "Future Libraries", "Libraries exist to acquire, give access to, and safeguard carriers of knowledge and information in all forms and provide instructions and assistance in the use of the collections to which their users have access. In short, libraries exist to give meaning to the continuing human attempt to transcend space and time in the advancement of knowledge and the preservation of culture ..."⁹. Libraries are thus expected to preserve, disseminate and use recorded knowledge in whatever form it may come so that humankind may become more knowledgeable; through knowledge reach understanding; and as an ultimate goal, achieve wisdom. It is within this ultimate goal of libraries that libraries owe a responsibility to society and the specific communities that they serve to ensure that information content is pursued with as much seriousness as information technology per se. The one-sided focus on information technology has to be matched by an equal determined effort to focus on information content. Libraries and Librarians can aid in this process.

TURNING CHALLENGES TO OPPORTUNITIES

It is, however, important to note that libraries differ in terms of size and the clientele they serve. Utilizing their different specializations and utilizing the new and emerging information and communication technologies to complement what libraries can do best, libraries can translate current over-indulgences in information technology utilization into positive tools to define new avenues of service to their clientele. Instead of seeing information technology as threats to their existence, libraries should see the new technologies as an opportunity to turn their positive elements (particularly with regard to Internet connectivity) to allow Libraries to utilize and benefit from using new ways and methodologies to do proven old things. Libraries have to be seen as crucial partners to ensuring the successful implementation of the AISI. Without the active participation of libraries in the AISI action framework, AISI's vision, strategic objectives and goals may remain too lofty and unreachable to be realistic and attainable for the African majority for whose eventual development the AISI has been established to address.

BUT WHAT SPECIFICALLY CAN LIBRARIES DO?

As noted above, libraries are not monolithic - they differ in size, mandates and clientele. In the AISI action framework document, much emphasis is placed on implementation strategies at the national level, where much of the action is really supposed to be located. In formulating and developing National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI) for every African country as stipulated in the AISI action framework, libraries could play useful catalytic roles. Decisions regarding the content of National Information and Communications Policy and Plans are expected to be drawn up at the national level by involving all sectors so as to bring along all the major players. Libraries constitute major stakeholders serving in their role both as information disseminators and as information providers. Accordingly, instead of sitting on the side-lines, libraries should actively play out their role as stakeholders and information providers by ensuring that they serve on national steering committees on Information and Communication. This way, they can influence policy directions regarding the establishment of NICI and eventually help sustain the AISI and its long term goals.

Some of the facilitating roles that different types of Libraries could play to catalyze development and move the AISI processes forward are outlined below:

(i) University/Research Libraries

- since our universities and colleges are the centres of intellectual activity in the African Region, their libraries invariably serve as depositories for indigenous source information whose content could be fed into any clearinghouse/networking arrangements to supply appropriate alternative African content and information into global information resources such as Internet. Actively pursued, they would be able to stop, if not reduce, the one-way flow of information on Africa from the developed world, which many concerned observers of the Internet cite as draw-backs to the free use of the Internet.

- most African countries have universities, colleges or other higher educational institutions of differing specializations. I believe that they can all be made to accommodate AISI vision and goals so that they can help sustain AISI.

(ii) Special/Industrial Libraries

- these Libraries, by virtue of their special nature and collections can serve as good sources of African indigenous information dealing with business, industrial development concerns etc. - elements which can enrich and contribute to Africa's perspectives on development.

Even though there are relatively few such libraries in the Region, many of them because of the comparatively healthy budgets of their parent organizations have reasonable budgets for managing their information activities. They could thus become valuable focal point/reference and referral nodes in a network of African business-related information which can be aggregated, and shared among African countries themselves while also sharing with global partners and networks. Such libraries could group along product lines, industrial activities etc. to ensure that indigenous information about African industries and business, special enterprises and the like get widely disseminated, through global information and communication networks. Africa does not always have to receive through Internet and similar networks. Libraries can, and should champion the cause of posting African information on these global networks.

(iii) Public/Municipal/Community Libraries

- in the crusade to ensure that the poor and disenfranchised groups, particularly in our rural communities (which constitute the majority of African peoples) are also given

free access to available information resources, the role of these libraries could spark off a real revolution in information collection, management and utilization in our countries. The goals of AISI will not be met, if by the target date of 2010, African countries have not been able to provide free access to information to all its citizens, poor, rich, literate, illiterate etc.

Though public/municipal libraries are not available in every country or major city in Africa, elements of public library service exist in many countries. Can public libraries play a role here by extending their mandates to encompass innovative, wider services particularly to the groups mentioned above? For example, in Nova Scotia, Canada, a special initiative has been introduced to connect all their public libraries to the Internet, thus giving free information access to all citizens. This was made possible through the support of the Government of Nova Scotia providing dedicated province-wide, Wide Area Network (WAN) complemented and supported by public library infrastructure comprising well-developed client-based service orientation by the library staff. The libraries also offered continuing education in the form of courses in Internet search skills for the general public.

The lessons from the above example are clear. African public and municipal libraries may not have the funds to enable them establish Internet access points in any given libraries but given the AISI action framework which calls for the establishment of tele-centres etc. could our public/municipal libraries not become potential ICT connection points to serve their communities? Libraries are ideal grounds with dedicated staff which can be mobilized to support such tele-centres by providing client-based services orientation and continuing user education on search strategies.

Most public libraries have sections which serve as children's libraries. Children's librarians could considerably help by organizing basic computing sessions for children and the youth much in the same way that they do now by providing other forms of entertainment (story-telling etc.). The challenges are many and we can turn them into opportunities for the provision of new services to our communities which require new orientations to knowledge acquisition because of the challenges of the present information age.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, Africa's development requires more than just Internet connections. As was noted by Mike Jensen at the recently ended Global Knowledge '97 Conference, "there is no point in having full Internet access unless there is content". The pipes have to be filled

with water from the African side if we are to avoid creating a uni-directional flow of information.

As indicated above, libraries have a role to make this possible using their existing infrastructure and expanding and improving their services to their communities in ways in which they are best equipped to do. Libraries and librarians, however, need to become more imaginative and willing to break new ground in order to embrace the vision and goals of the AISI. There are many actions which do not cost much, except willingness and commitment, which librarians as community leaders can initiate and support to help keep up the momentum of the AISI, even if many African countries currently lack the infrastructure and resources needed to align themselves fully with the projections and actions of the AISI, for many years to come.

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