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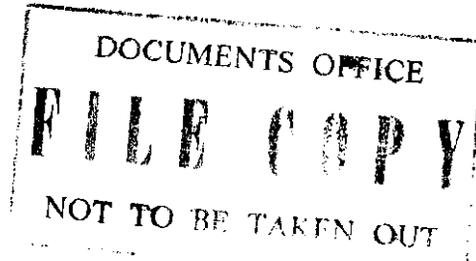
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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Fourth Meeting of the Committee
on Development Information (CODI IV)

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
23 – 28 April 2005



**Progress report on AVLIN since CODI III to
ICT/Library subcommittee**

Background

At its second meeting held in Addis Ababa from 4-7 September 2001, the Committee on Development Information (CODI) mandated DISD to develop the African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN) as a platform for sharing development information and as a means for bridging the digital divide in Africa. The ECA Library, located within the DISD, which serves as a knowledge repository, took up the challenge to develop a knowledge sharing mechanism for the region.

AVLIN was conceived as a network of virtual libraries and knowledge exchanges to be operated by interested African libraries, information centres and specialized networks, and to provide Internet-based information and knowledge assets, resources and services. It is also a regional capacity building framework to help build capacities among librarians and information specialists in information management and related skills so as to better organize knowledge and information for researchers, policy makers, and others interested in African socioeconomic development. As a "gateway of gateways" for African development knowledge and information resources, AVLIN provides a platform and hub for the exchange of knowledge and information across the African continent.

The following report is an update of key activities undertaken since May 2003 when the third meeting of the Committee on Development Information (CODI III) was held in Addis Ababa. During CODI III, AVLIN was formally inaugurated and its Advisory Committee (AAC) was launched.

Governance

The AVLIN Advisory Committee (AAC) was inaugurated in May 2003 to drive the process of AVLIN's development and implementation. AAC, made up of nine members selected in their personal and professional capacities from around the continent, was appointed by the Executive Secretary of the ECA for two-year periods of tenure. At its inaugural meeting, AAC considered the *AVLIN Business Plan for 2003/2005, Guidelines for AVLIN membership*, and *the AVLIN concept, objectives and structure*. It also considered and endorsed *the AVLIN work plan* and made relevant recommendations for action.

ECA has provided resources to recruit staff who will combine client and outreach related functions, and under whom AVLIN will be coordinated and managed.

The AVLIN Secretariat has endeavored to implement the following activities in pursuance of the AAC recommendations of 2003:

AVLIN's activities to date:

- **Capacity building**

Efforts were concentrated at building capacity in the field of information and knowledge management. For example, a pre CODI III (May 2003) event was held entitled “Workshop on technical aspects of building digital libraries and electronic information networks”. Over 30 participants drawn from different libraries and information centres from the African region participated and the results and feedback on the value of the workshop have been very positive and helped to build capacities.

That workshop, which was intended to provide participants with a clear understanding of the technical issues related to the development of digital and virtual libraries and associated knowledge services, and to contribute to African institutional capacity building efforts in this area, has already started bearing fruit. It aimed to stimulate the development of projects focusing on digital and virtual library services in Africa, to highlight the need for Africa-relevant research and development on digital information delivery for national development, and to provide a general framework, models and opportunities for the acquisition of concrete technical knowledge for effective development and management of digital libraries and electronic information networks. The very keen interest generated among librarians is a clear testimony to the benefits derived from the workshop.

Plans are underway to publish a training manual using the large number of documents and other materials which were issued by experts at the workshop, for subsequent capacity building initiatives. This year, as a result of the keen interest expressed by librarians who have plans to establish digital and/or virtual libraries of their own and to keep up with the current momentum, the AVLIN Secretariat is organizing a follow up workshop during CODI IV, which will help to refine the strategic direction AVLIN wishes to take to maximize its impact and to better serve its members in the region.

Additionally, in October 2004, the Library co-hosted a workshop in Addis Ababa for African UN depository libraries, with the Dag Hammarskjöld Library of UNHQ. Attended by 35 participants from 12¹ African countries with UN depository library collections this workshop generated much interest and has served as a major impetus among UN depository librarians on better management of UN documentation and how to provide greater access to them in member States. The Library also held another training workshop, titled *KnowledgeWorks I (October 2004)* for the reference and research staff from ECA and its Subregional Offices (SROs) in an effort to enhance capacities in information handling and management. An update of this workshop *KnowledgeWorks II* will be organized this year, 2005.

These capacity building activities are in line with the recommendations made at the 2003 AVLIN technical workshop, which called on ECA to advise and provide technical services to member States and institutions to allow them to more fully participate in AVLIN.

¹ The participants’ countries include Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

- **The AVLIN website and knowledge portal**

The AVLIN website, whose prototype was inaugurated during CODI III, has since undergone extensive review and redesign to make it user friendly for AVLIN members and potential libraries and institutions. The review exercise benefited considerably from AAC members who contributed time to ensuring a good product. It can be accessed on <http://www.uneca.org/temp2/avlin/home1.htm>.

With these links, AVLIN members can connect with each other and also with other important sites, including existing knowledge networks, African development information resources, African libraries, reference materials and full-text resources. This will help AVLIN to become an authoritative resource on economic development for policy makers, researchers, and all others interested in this field.

The development of this AVLIN portal fulfills the recommendation made by AAC that such a facility should be created. Even though currently only available in English there are plans for a similar portal in French and eventually in Arabic and in other African languages, as had been recommended by the AAC meeting of 2003.

- **Establishment of the AVLIN African Librarians Advocacy Group**

Soon after the CODI III meetings, the AVLIN Secretariat established the African Librarians Advocacy Group (avlin-l@dgroups.org). The objective of this forum was to facilitate professional discussion among librarians and other information professionals for advocacy at the highest levels on the continent relating to regional information and knowledge initiatives. It has been observed that African librarians could provide inputs into, and influence policy decisions and directions on, several information activities and programmes being implemented on the continent, such as:

- African Information Society Initiative (AIS);
- New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD);
- African Renaissance;
- World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS);
- African Networks Campaign on Education for All (ANCEFA);
- Dakar Framework for Action; and
- Global Campaign for Education.

Several rounds of discussions have been held on issues such as library associations and how they can enhance professional development in Africa; the enhanced role of libraries/ librarians in Africa; closer harmonization of AVLIN related activities with those of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Africa Section. Other discussion points are underway and so far, the AVLIN

Advocacy Group is proving a very popular forum for openly discussing Library/Information related matters on the continent.

- **Partnerships and collaboration**

Efforts were directed at networking and creating greater awareness of AVLIN among several professional groups at conferences, meetings and seminars. For example, the ECA Library's membership in the IFLA Africa Section has continued to provide an opportunity to network with other African-based initiatives and to promote the role of libraries in the development of the Information Society in Africa. At the 69th IFLA Council and General Conference in Berlin in August 2003, the ECA Library sought to raise awareness on the role of libraries as facilitators of e-government initiatives in Africa, since libraries have the capacity and opportunity to make their facilities available to the general public without prejudice or bias and by providing transparent access to government information. The Library delivered a paper² at the conference providing the African perspective on official government publications.

Through collaboration with UN system libraries, AVLIN hopes to benefit from the new strategic directions being espoused by the UN library system. In this context, the AVLIN Secretariat participated in the *Steering Committee for the Modernization and Integrated Management of United Nations Libraries* in the hope that jointly with other UN libraries, AVLIN will more actively serve member States through such networking. Additionally, cooperation with the UN depository library programme and the Official Document System (ODS) of the United Nations is being pursued in earnest and will be greatly facilitated to provide more efficient resources to assist member States by providing greater access to UN and ECA documentation.

In September 2004, the AVLIN Secretariat participated in a UN Interagency Knowledge Sharing workshop in New York and had the opportunity to network and brief the audience of United Nations librarians and knowledge specialists³. This was an opportunity for inter-agency and inter-regional cooperation and it is hoped that the invitation given to workshop participants to network with AVLIN in order to better serve AVLIN members will be positive.

- **Awareness creation and sensitization**

Efforts were intensified in developing and publicizing the AVLIN knowledge portal, to which effect we have worked considerably on the AVLIN website

² The paper, titled "Government Information and Democracy: African Concerns and Perspectives", was very well received, resulting in IFLA's decision to publish it in the *IFLA Journal*

³ AVLIN presented a paper titled "*Promoting knowledge sharing in Africa: the case of African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN)*", which dealt with the various challenges and opportunities faced by the project including building up access to available information and knowledge resources, capacity building activities, partnership arrangements and future plans

(<http://www.uneca.org/temp2/avlin/home1.htm>) to provide information on the project to members. This has undergone several revisions, and AVLIN members are currently providing their input into upgrading the site.

In order to further sensitize potential members of AVLIN, the AVLIN Secretariat prepared and widely disseminated promotional posters and a brochure on AVLIN. These were distributed at conferences, meetings and the like to inform and encourage participation in AVLIN. With these promotional materials, information about AVLIN is being widely disseminated to key decision makers, researchers and libraries in the Africa region.

Challenges and future plans

The process towards expanding membership in AVLIN has been slower than was initially expected, in part due to a lack of technical infrastructure at potential AVLIN sites in many parts of the continent. Accordingly, AVLIN is reviewing its plans and putting in place new strategic directions and partnerships to refocus the project and add new momentum.

In the future therefore, changes will be made to the original plan of developing the AVLIN pilot phase around ten libraries two of which were to be selected from ECA's five sub-regions. In the proposed new pilot phase, AVLIN will focus on one or two university libraries which already demonstrate commitment and interest to participate and share information within the AVLIN network. Other types of libraries (national, public, special) will be invited to join later on as the experience from the pilot phase instructs and their demonstrated interest, commitment and infrastructure support.

The one or two interested university libraries should be those with a ready audience and clientele of faculty, researchers, graduate students and the like who have the need to access and use information and knowledge resources both from their own university libraries and from other library networks. For 2005, AVLIN proposes to focus on building partnerships with the Database on Theses and Dissertations (DATAD) of the Association of African Universities (AAU) and to collaborate with for example Addis Ababa University Library which is already a member of DATAD in order to have more immediate impact through joint activities that can later be replicated elsewhere on the continent. It is fortunate coincidence that a large number of AAC members are also board members of DATAD -- it should therefore be possible to derive synergies from participation in joint programmes.

AVLIN plans to begin an outreach programme to address the needs of policy makers and researchers through other formats by issuing CD-Roms, email alert services and other full-text knowledge materials on economic development issues. This is intended to fill a recognized gap in the currently available online development resources, which do not cover economic development in Africa, by providing access to appropriate content.

AVLIN will strengthen its links with the academic community through strategic partnership arrangements, which will help to ensure complementary services to researchers and policy makers. In this way, AVLIN will connect university libraries and departments

of economics to the resources they need, both from ECA and the larger African academic community.

In the spirit of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action, AVLIN will work with the appropriate bodies, particularly those dealing with the development of African content and languages, to ensure that African development information is packaged for use by African researchers and policy makers as is currently being done in agriculture, health and other sectors. AVLIN will also collaborate extensively with other institutions and bodies responsible for content development to ensure that copyright and related intellectual property rights are respected whilst it promotes knowledge exchanges among its partners and members.

Conclusion

The goal to establish AVLIN as a mechanism for connecting high value information users to electronic library and development information resources on Africa and to enhanced information and knowledge exchanges will be pursued in great earnest. AVLIN will need partners, donors and other interested libraries to ensure an effective relay of information and knowledge to its participating libraries and institutions.

Bibliography of sources on AVLIN and similar digital and virtual library initiatives

For further reading on the AVLIN project and similar digital and virtual library initiatives, please consult the following works. If you would like to have access to any of the materials on this list, contact the ECA Library at:

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Library

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Tel: +251 1 51 72 00 ext. 33114;

Direct line: +251 1 51 02 80

E-mail: ecalibadmin@uneca.org

AVLIN Knowledge Portal: <http://www.uneca.org/temp2/avlin/home1.htm>

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