

A review of consortia building among university libraries in Africa

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Abstract

Discusses evolving trends in library consortia building against the backdrop of recent developments in some African countries. The expected benefits and barriers to consortia building are highlighted. The writers then suggest the way forward in successful consortia building among university libraries in Africa.

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Introduction

A library consortia may take the form of a co-operative arrangement between several libraries, for example, for loaning books, or an electronic network inter-connecting different libraries, or a number of these together. This has become necessary these days mainly because of the increase in volume of information being produced in print and electronic formats.

Increasingly, consortia building is placing emphasis on computerised multilibrary networks involving shared databases, telecommunication links and common applications. However, in the case of Africa, they need not all be computer-based as slight modifications can be made to suit any particular situation.

Currently, there is a new focus on consortia building worldwide for the following reasons, among others:

- the quality of services is enhanced;
- the cost of service is reduced; and
- duplication of stock is minimised.

The irony of the situation in Africa is that although information is more available worldwide today than in any other era of human history, most of it is inaccessible in the Africa countries.

However, there are several areas for consortia building which could be of benefit to university libraries in Africa. These include:

- interlibrary loan and document delivery;
- shared databases;
- sharing/exchange of staff;
- co-operative cataloguing;
- co-operative acquisitions;
- co-operation in the exchange of duplicate materials;
- sharing expertise in answering reference questions; and
- co-operative storage.

It is expected that each country will determine the areas in which it is best placed to function. A firm articulated policy and plan can then be put in place.

Library consortia in Africa

There are a few functioning consortia in Africa, most of which are in the southern



Africa region. These are detailed in the following.

South African Bibliographic and Information Network (SABINET)

SABINET was established in 1983 as a not-for-profit organisation to provide a bibliographic utility for South Africa. It has since developed into a full-fledged online information network. It is responsible for the compilation of the SACat, the catalogue of books, journals and other materials held in Southern African libraries. SACat currently contains approximately 2.5 million bibliographic references with more than seven million holdings (Kempt, 1996).

SABINET supports the cataloguing and acquisition processes in libraries, with access to the Library of Congress, British National Bibliography, South African National Bibliography (SANB); Book Data and similar databases. Access to OCLC's PRISM service is also provided. Resource sharing is promoted through the interlending systems, with more than 90 per cent of the interlending requests in South Africa being processed through the SABINET system.

Other unique South African information sources hosted by SABINET include:

- index to South African periodicals (ISAP);
- research at South African universities (UCTD);
- research at S.S. Technikons (NAVTECH);
- the South African co-operative indexing database; and
- fulltext of South African Government and Provincial Gazettes (Kempt, 1996).

SABINET is also the South African distributor of OCLC services which is a gateway to UnCover, the USA-based electronic table of contents service, and founder of ELSA in co-operation with Silver Platter and their local agents. ELSA provides access to Silver Platter's CD-ROM databases through wide-area networks.

All the universities, technikons, research institutions, government departments, public libraries as well as companies, legal firms, engineers, medical practitioners and other professional bodies are using the SABINET services. Institutions in Namibia and Botswana are accessing SABINET, and SABINET itself is linked to all major

networks (such as UNINET, SANGONET) in South Africa.

Gauteng and Environs Library Consortium (GAELIC)

GAELIC, a major project of the umbrella consortium FOTIM (Foundation of Tertiary Institutions in the Northern Metropolis), was initiated in February 1996, when representatives of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation visited South Africa and expressed willingness to support a co-operative venture among tertiary libraries in Gauteng – the Johannesburg-Pretoria metropolitan area of South Africa. This is the most populous and industrialised part of the country and it is the economic heartland. Within this area, there are a considerable number of tertiary institutions. Members of Gaelic currently are the University of Witwatersrand, University of South Africa, Rand Afrikaans University, Pretoria University, Medical University of South Africa, Potchesfroom University for Higher Christian Education, Vista University, Technikon South Africa, Technikon Witwaterstand, Technikon Pretoria, Technikon Northern Gauteng and Vaal Triangle Technikon. At present the state library participates as an observer (INASP, 1997).

GAELIC's main objectives are to:

- support the information needs of clients through co-operation;
- promote resource sharing and enhance access to information;
- facilitate this access through shared computer systems and networks;
- improve information literacy among clients and to share training resources and expertise; and
- build links with other libraries in the region as appropriate (INASP, 1997).

The major focus of Gaelic has been placed on resource sharing, and task groups have undertaken responsibility for document delivery and joint serial acquisitions. All GAELIC libraries will eventually use INNOPAC as the common library software and ARIEL for document transfer. The GAELIC's union database is expected to greatly enhance resource sharing amongst members. It is envisaged that the GAELIC union catalogue will form the basis of a new, upgraded national union database.

Cape Library Co-operative (CALICO)

CALICO is the first library co-operative of its kind in South Africa and was officially established in 1993. It consists of the three universities and two Technikons of the Western Cape Province of South Africa, namely, the University of Cape Town, the University of Stellenbosch, the University of Western Cape, the Cape Technikon and the Peninsula Technikon. It forms part of a group of projects undertaken under the auspices of an umbrella body, the Western Cape Tertiary Institutions Trust, recently renamed as the Adamastor Trust (van der Walt, 1997).

The aim of the consortium is to improve access to information whilst reducing overall costs, and this aim has been adopted by academic libraries in many countries. The policies will include access to collections by all alumni, harmonisation of procedures and pooling of resources (Underwood, 1997). Projects or activities underway or being implemented include a common electronic catalogue (which will form the core of a shared system), an electronic delivery system for short documents, a physical document delivery system, an investigation into bringing full-text electronic serials online, information literacy and user training programmes. The co-operative itself hopes to expand and include other institutions in the Western Cape, such as schools colleges, community libraries, state institutions, national depository libraries, and libraries in commerce, industry, NGOs and community advice bureaux.

Cataloguing network in**Pietermaritzburg (CATNIP)**

CATNIP is a group of libraries in the Pietermaritzburg area which is building up a joint catalogue on the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) Library computer, the reasoning being similar to CALICO's; i.e. shared resources and organisation in the face of budget constraints, and a need to extend library services beyond the locality. The initiative encompasses 11 libraries in all, including the Natal Society Library and Umgeni Water (a private company and second largest bulk water supplier in South Africa). A "theological cluster" of five religious libraries – all of them Christian – completes the grouping. The holdings (excluding Natal University) total about 130,000 records and most of the institutions

are accessed online (*CALICO News*, 1996). Another co-operative underway in KwaZulu/Natal province of South Africa is the eastern seaboard initiative comprising the libraries of the University of Natal (both campuses), University of Zululand, and Natal, ML Sultan and Mangosuthu Technikons. The initiative has been operative for a little over two years and co-operation is in the areas of user education standards and electronic information sharing.

South Eastern Academic Library System (SEALS)

Also in South Africa, a library grouping called SEALS (South Eastern Academic Library System) has existed since 1988 in the Eastern Cape province. Initially, the members were the Universities of Rhodes, Port Elizabeth and Fort-Hare but the group has since expanded to include Vista University's Port Elizabeth Campus, the University of Transkei, Port Elizabeth Technikon, Border Technician and Eastern Cape Technician. Co-operation is limited to periodicals and CD-ROM integration (*CALICO News*, 1996).

Ghana and Kenya

In Ghana and Kenya, at the initiative of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) section on document delivery and interlibrary lending, two simultaneous projects have electronically linked up the main university libraries in these countries since 1993. Danish and Norwegian agencies are providing funding. The projects are now in full swing with librarians visiting the UK and Scandinavian countries, and European experts visiting Ghana and Kenya to help in establishing connectivity and training of staff. In Ghana, Danish and UK partners have teamed up to assist the Ghanaians with the exercise since 1995. The project is supported by DANIDA, the Danish International Development Agency, with about US\$400,000 for a three year trial. The project focuses on the following institutions and their libraries:

- the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra;
- the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi;
- the University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast;
- the University College of Education, Winneba;

- the University for Development Studies, Tamale; and
- the Institute of Scientific and Technological Information, Accra.

A steering committee was established in 1996 with representatives from all the above institutions. This formed the management structure of the co-operative project.

The project aims to:

- improve access to information by establishing electronic network links at participating universities;
- improve the competence of library personnel in handling interlibrary loan and document delivery systems nationally, regionally and globally; and
- support negotiations with the main European documentation centres and libraries to obtain favourable bulk treaties for database searches and document services to participating countries (INASP, 1997).

The university library in Aarhus, Denmark, the OCLC and the British Library have also agreed to support the project.

Namibia

In Namibia, a grant from UNESCO has enabled the National Library, National Archives, and Ministry of Education head office to set up a network for mutual direct access to their computer databases and to the Internet. The University of Namibia Library is also working on a five year project (named COMLIB) sponsored by the Belgian and Namibian Governments. The intention is to link up the library at the main campus, the library of the Faculty of Medical and Health Science at Katutura, the library of the Faculty of Agriculture and Conservation at Newdham, the Polytechnic of Namibia Library and the nine distance teaching centres scattered all over the country. The project is already underway and there is already a link between the polytechnic library and the university library. The main objective is to develop a more efficient and effective means of accessing and sharing resources within a networked multi-campus institution (Jalloh, 1999).

Obstacles and the way forward

It can be seen from above that, while consortial development is becoming

increasingly popular in North America and UK, libraries in Africa are just beginning to take advantage of this development.

It would appear from the available literature, that the three main hindrances to library consortia building in Africa are:

- (1) financial;
- (2) management; and
- (3) accessibility to materials.

Any attempts at ensuring success in consortia building will therefore have to tackle these obstacles, among others.

Almost a decade ago, Diana Rosenberg proposed various ways in which resource sharing among African university libraries could be improved. This remains a valuable guide today even in the area of consortia building. Some of the measures she suggested are:

- (1) Requesting a percentage allocation of the university budget, e.g. 5 per cent or 6 per cent. If estimates are slashed, then at least the library will continue to get a share rather than nothing. If estimates increase, then the library allocation will also automatically increase.
- (2) Insisting that money from income generating activities is paid into a separate library account rather than into the general university account.
- (3) Campaigning for the decentralisation of university budgets, so that control over expenditure lies with the library. Planning will then become a meaningful exercise.
- (4) Suggesting that universities within a country specialise at the research level, so that each university library will be able to rationalise its acquisition of expensive books and journals.
- (5) Insisting that a percentage of all outside aid to faculties and departments automatically comes to the library, so that it is able to adequately satisfy the information needs of the project being funded (Rosenberg, 1993).

While the suggestions above would seem to provide some solutions to the financial problems, there are still the managerial problems to contend with in consortia building among university libraries in Africa. Any co-operative activity requires a high level of managerial skill and commitment if it is to succeed. In the view of Gorman and Cullen (2000), successful co-operative ventures are characterised by six features:

- (1) committed leadership;
- (2) a formal governing structure;
- (3) staff participation;
- (4) staff training;
- (5) adequate funds; and
- (6) agreed collection description guidelines.

Taking these wise words, it is suggested that all participating libraries in the consortia should be bound by rules and regulations and made to sign an agreement to join the consortia. The senior management, the governing body and the parent organisation's executive must all be fully committed to the consortia. There should also be a central co-ordination point for the project. In this regard, one of the better-resourced university libraries would be the co-ordinating centre. The governing structure must have the responsibility and authority to make and review policy, to review activities and to issue directives for management of the consortia.

Another issue to be taken seriously when considering consortia building is the tools for consortia building. These include the creation of local databases for efficient co-operation, a union list of serials and other available materials such as catalogues. Unfortunately, this is an area where African libraries have to do a lot of "homework". This is because the essential bibliographic tools are not available in most libraries. Each country should build up its National Union Catalogue and National Union List of Serials so as to create conditions for firm control of the bibliographic situation in Africa (Alemna, 1991)

There is also the political dimension in consortia building. In Africa, such developments might require support at the highest level of government and may even require the support of international bodies such as the African Union (AU) and its sub-regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADEC) and the Magreb Union (MU). In this way, it might be easier to impress on governments the need to support information infrastructures and assist in the provision of access to global information database.

Conclusion

It can be seen from the discussion so far, that the factors that favour consortia building, and often make it a necessity among university libraries in Africa, are on the increase. It is therefore necessary that all the required groundwork be carried out for the adoption of this strategy.

It is in this vein that the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) should be commended for making available funding for two research projects in the area of consortia building. The offer has been made to the Standing Conference of African University Librarians – Western Area (SCAULWA) to commission feasibility studies on the establishment of consortia in two countries, preferably Nigeria and Senegal. Hopefully, scarce resources would be maximised in this way.

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