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Resource Sharing, Networking and Consortia in African Libraries *(pp. 43-48)*

[1]O. Folorunso and [2]F. J. Folorunso
[1]University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria
[2]Department of Library, Archival and Information Science,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Abstract: This paper explores the concepts, issues and facilities offered by the library consortium and shows how the library consortium makes resources available among member libraries. The study also identifies the possibilities and problems of building library consortium in developing Africa. Recommendations suggesting models for the future prospect of library consortia in Africa are offered.

Key words: resource, sharing, networking, consortia

1 INTRODUCTION

This is an age of information explosion. There is no library however big it may be, that has all it takes to satisfy all the needs of its users and this is due to various constraints. Okeagu and Okeagu (2008) submitted that African libraries have realized that no matter how they are well funded, it is still very difficult to acquire all the materials needed by their patrons. In view of this fact, partnership and co-operation at local, national and international levels have become inevitable for all libraries. Townley (1992) in his work on college library consortia in the United States of America acknowledged that a college library alone cannot afford enhanced collections in more than a few subject areas but by banding together, college library collections can form a virtual research library to the benefit of faculty and students at all participating institutions. The concept of library consortium has developed as a result of the aspirations of libraries to reach out to more users and to satisfy their information needs from time to time. Consortium of libraries is well known for sharing of resources all over the world. Information explosion, emergence of internet and particularly World Wide Web as a new medium of information storage and gateway make the consortium of libraries come more into sight than before.

Africa as a continent has many libraries distributed among the nations but the levels of understanding and practice of library consortium, resource sharing and networking vary from region to region because of the different levels of Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure. Although the idea of co-operation has been in existence for many years but library consortium is still at its nascent state in many countries in developing world like Africa. Library consortium as an emerging development where the number of participating libraries is increasing daily has been reviewed by few experts in the past. Most of the literature is on case studies determining the feasibility aspects of it (Consortium of National Information Resource Sharing, 2008). In Africa and Nigeria in

particular John Harris ignited the flame of library co-operation in 1955 by submitting a memorandum to the Nigerian government advocating for the establishment of a Library Advisory and Consultative Committee for Resource Sharing (Bozimo, 1980). As well, in 1974 the National Library of Nigeria initiated a resource sharing and networking scheme which involved the machinery for the establishment of National Union List of Serials (NUSLOS) which eventually took off in 1977 (Dosumu, 1981).

Sanni and Igbafe (2004) highlighted individuals' and groups' efforts in the past at fostering co-operation among some university libraries in Nigeria. Example of group of university libraries comprising of the Ahmadu Bello University, Obafemi Awolowo University, University of Ibadan, University of Benin, University of Ilorin and the University of Nigeria, Usukka was given. These were attempts at enhancing library co-operation among Universities, promoting co-operative acquisition, the production of an index to Nigerian theses and dissertations, the production of an index to Nigerian periodicals, the establishment of reference libraries in selected university libraries, the setting up of reference libraries, the formation of a consortia of e-library etc.

Faniran (1991) argued that the chances of inter-library co-operation succeeding in Nigeria and consequently in Africa is slim just because the bid to co-operate was started at the top from the national level instead from the bottom at the local level. Adedigba (1984) proposed a better way to go by library cooperation in order to record more success by making a case for a formalized agreement to be signed by the member libraries.

2 LIBRARY CONSORTIUM, NETWORKING AND RESOURCE SHARING DEFINED.

Although no particular date can be cited as the beginning point of library consortium, the concept of consortium as an association or partnership has long been a tenet of librarianship. Consortia (p1ural) or consortium (singular) literarily means fellowship. Homogeneously, the term "consortia" can be translated to mean alliance, collaboration, co-operation or partnership. A library consortium is a group of two or more libraries that have agreed to cooperate with each other in order to fulfill certain similar needs, usually resource sharing. Cooperation among libraries which is not a new concept is according to Sanni and Igbafe (2004) an imperative for resources sharing and networking among libraries for the provision of qualitative library services especially in Nigeria being a developing nation like other African countries where development is in a very abysmal state. Traditionally, library cooperation meant sharing collection in some ways but is could as well include sharing of services, or of processes such as joint cataloguing of materials, or of staff and user training.
Consortium is further defined as an association of independent libraries and/or library systems established by formal agreement usually for the purpose of resource sharing. Membership may be restricted to a specific geographical region, type of library (academic, public, school) or subject specialization. The term consortium, networking, resource sharing, co-operation and partnerships are used inter-changeably to refer to strategic alliances amongst libraries with the aim of meeting the demands of clients for services that are delivered faster and reliably.

In other words library consortium as a generic term is used to indicate any group of libraries working together towards a common goal whether to expand co-operation on traditional library services in the area of collection development or electronic information services. However, the common thing of all the definitions and consequently the subject matter is the coming together of libraries having common interest, needs and purposes to achieve a common goal that is beyond what an individual library could achieve on its own.

3 OBJECTIVES OF CONSORTIUM FORMATION

The ultimate goal of libraries is to satisfy the information needs of its patrons. Libraries as mentioned above come together to form a consortium in order to fulfill this objective with ease. Some of the objectives of library consortium include the following:

- Promoting formal relations between members to foster collaboration and networking.
- Supporting optimal access to information for members through regional and national co-operation.
- Promoting collection building and resource sharing.
- Providing support for the implementation and management of common library systems.
- Improving information literacy skills and sharing training resources and expertise

4 ELEMENTS OF CONSORTIUM BUILDING

Okeagu and Okeagu (2008) identified some of the essential elements of consortium building as:

1. **Mutual objective:** Before there can be a library consortium, there must have been a proper arrangement and clear understanding of its objectives. These mutual objectives are then incorporated in the consortium agreement or charter.
2. **Joint Decision Process:** All problems and decisions arising from the consortium are regarded as being jointly owned and therefore must be jointly resolved by every member of the consortium. The decision making process must be more proactive and forward looking.
3. **Continuous Improvement:** All partners in the consortium must continue to receive worthwhile benefits from the agreement and this demands a continuous review of the partner's performance over the life of the consortium. Before the consortium begins the key performance indicators must be agreed upon.

5 LIBRARY CONSORTIA IN AFRICA

There are, presently, few consortia in Africa. Most of them are located in South-Africa and few are scattered in other few African countries. At present, there is no library consortium in Nigeria but few university libraries are enjoying the pool of electronic resources of consortia in developed countries courtesy of big brother corporations like Carnegie Corporation, Ford Foundation etc. In the real sense of it, no Nigerian universities can be said to be participating in consortium as we are not sharing resources but only using the resources of others. This situation is similar in most African countries because of some

inherent factors like digital divide, low level of Information Communication Technology (ICT) awareness, unavailability of required electronic and digital infrastructure. It is, however, appreciated that many of the Nigerian university libraries are in varying degree of computerization and automation and these are essential ingredients to participating in consortium. The table 1 shows the South-African libraries participating in one consortium or another.

Table 1: South-African libraries Consortium

Higher education Consortium	Geographic Coverage	Library Consortium (Committee)	Library Consortium Formally Established
Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) http://www.chec.ac.za	Western Cape Province	Cape Library Consortium (CALICO)	1992
Eastern Cape Higher Education Association (ECHEA) http://www.echea.ac.za	Eastern Cape Province	South Eastern Alliance of Library Systems (SEALS)	1998
Eastern Seaboard Association Tertiary Institutions (ESATI) http://www.esati.org.za	Kwazulu-Natal Province	Eastern Seaboard Association of Libraries (ESAL)	1997
Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM) http://www.fotim.ac.za	Incorporates the provinces of Gauteng, Northwest and Limpopo	Gauteng and Environs Library Consortium (GAELIC)	1996
Free State Higher Education Consortium http://www.uos.ac.za/support/library/E_frelico.php	Free State Province	Free State Library and Information Consortium (FRELICO)	1997

Source: Consortium of National Information Resource Sharing, 2008. (http;www.nlc.gov.cn/old/old/newpages/english/cooperate/index.htm)

6 PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF CONSORTIA FORMATION IN AFRICA

The level of ICT literacy and awareness in Africa differs from country to country and as earlier pointed out the essential ingredients of consortium formation are computerization, automation and literacy in these areas. Some of the problems militating against the formation of library consortium in Africa include lack of awareness and understanding on the part of most heads of libraries and policy makers, slim budget and poor funding of libraries, technical compatibility and security, egos and lackadaisical attitudes among libraries, inadequate resources, unavailability of web environment and lack of the required drive and leadership. It is hoped that if some of these problems are well addressed, the birth and development of formidable library consortium in Africa will be more feasible. Technology transforms Libraries and Information Services (LIS). Therefore, the LIS have to adapt to meet their users' changing needs and growing expectations. Resource sharing initiatives need to be conceived by libraries which may lead to the creation of a computerized network or consortium of all libraries.

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In this paper, attempts have been made to highlight the needs for and the importance of resource sharing, networking and library consortium in African libraries. It is axiomatic to say that a single library may not on its own, no matter how well funded, be able to satisfy all the needs of its patrons. A tree, an African adage says, cannot make a forest. It is obvious from the revelations of literatures that Africa as a continent is still lagging behind other world continents in these areas of resource sharing, networking and library consortia. Africa cannot afford to stay behind especially in this era of information explosion and this alone makes the move towards the formation of library consortia a necessity and a project of utmost priority if the continent must move forward. The conclusion reached is that more formidable and decisive steps towards the formation of resource sharing, networking and library consortia in Africa must be made urgently and with more seriousness and commitment so that African libraries too can move in leaps and bounds in closing the digital divide between the continent and the developed world.

In view of the foregoing, it is recommended that:

1. African libraries should embrace, more than before, computerization and automation as these are *sine qua non* to resource sharing, networking and library consortia;
2. African government should be more favourably disposed to the project of forming library consortia in their policy and decision making;
3. Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure should be improved;
4. periodic training of librarians and other information professionals in the new trends in the ICT and library automation to be able to handle the intricacies of resource sharing and networking;
5. Users' education on the new development in the above mentioned areas should, as well, be priotised;

6. African libraries should be well funded because funding is the heart of enterprises (Anafulu, 1996);
7. Web environment should be made available among African libraries so as to make the sharing of resources possible and easy.

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