Progressive Librarianship in Africa
The PALIAct Story

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THE AFRICAN PROGRESSIVE LIBRARIAN and Information Activists' Group (PALIAct) is an initiative of the Department of Applied Social Sciences (DASS) at the London Metropolitan University, It is a partnership with a group of progressive African librarians and information workers.

PALIAct has the support of the progressive librarians, groups, including the Progressive Librarians Guild in the USA with its publication *Progressive Librarian*[2] and Bibliotek i Samhälle in Sweden, with its publication *bis*.[3]

PALIAct seeks to develop people-oriented information services decided upon by workers, peasants, pastoralists, fisher people and other marginalised individuals and groups whose information needs have not been met. It involves working in partnership with other professionals and service providers. PALIAct operates on principles of equality, democracy and social justice and encourages a pan-African world outlook among information and community activists. PALIAct sees the right to relevant information as a basic human right.

The idea of PALIAct had been under discussion for many years, but got a new lease of life during the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) meeting in Glasgow in 2002, when a number of participants agreed that a new approach to meeting Africa's information needs was needed. This was discussed at the Africa Regional Section meeting as well as in smaller, informal groups. The key idea that emerged from these discussions was that African librarianship needed to 'liberate itself from the colonial–imperialist mould'. These views were in keeping with the consensus that Issak found:[4]

> The consensus of opinion seems to be that African librarians need to rethink what a public library is all about, in terms of what is needed, what will be used, and what is sustainable in Africa. Perhaps some new and more viable visions will result. In particular, public libraries in Africa need to start to be more aggressive and introduce services that are attractive to the users. Librarians must begin to know their potential users, and not only assume that they are school children. More dynamism and more involvement of the user community, extended to all users … are required for the improvement of public library services.

Those who showed an interest in the ideas discussed at IFLA came from Britain, Cameroon, Cuba, Ethiopia (including librarians from the Economic Commission for Africa, and the then OAU), Ghana, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria and USA. An informal network of those interested was set up, but no action was taken to formalise the organisation. It was felt that the first step was to spread the idea widely in Africa and develop the organisation once there was sufficient grassroots support.

The proposal was revived when a librarian from Ghana, George Obeng, visited Ethiopia and met some of those present at the Glasgow IFLA meetings. He wrote:

> I was in Addis Ababa for a UN documentation workshop last October. ... on the last day I had dinner with Petrina, the Librarian at the ECA. She talked extensively about how you tried to work on the progressive library association. You could see that it pains her that it couldn't work. Why don't you try to revive it?[5]

At the same time, there was renewed interest and support from the Editor of the Newsletter of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association,[6] Roland Barksdale-Hall, as well as from other committed individuals, including Del R. Hornbuckle.[7] Support also came from Al Kagan,[8] who is active in IFLA as well as in the Social Responsibility Round Table of the American Library Association.[9]

It was then decided to launch a semi-formal 'ideas forum' as the first stage of setting up a progressive organisation. A formal organisation could then be set up if and when the idea took root. Thus was born PALIAct. Its first action was the mailing in February 2005 of its vision and proposals to those who had indicated an interest." The great interest in the ideas was indicated by the fact that the statement got wide coverage in the professional press.[11]

The PALIAct vision

PALIAct provides a vision of a people-orientated information service that could meet the information needs of workers and peasants. It works towards providing an anti-imperialist and pan-African world outlook among African librarians and information workers. It also seeks to set up an alternative information service in partnership with the potential users of the service as a way of showing what needs to be done. PALIAct aims to form partnerships with progressive information and other workers within Africa and overseas.

The World Summit on the Information Society recognised that 'education, knowledge, information and communication are at the core of human progress, endeavour and well-

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[5] E-mail from George Obeng to Shiraz Durrani, 24 December 2004.

[6] For further information about BCALA, see <http://www.bcala.org>.

[7] Dell manages the Academy of Educational Development (AED)'s Global Learning Portal in USA.

[8] Al Kagan is the African Studies Bibliographer and Professor of Library Administration at University of Illinois Library.

[9] Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) is a unit within the American Library Association. It works to make ALA more democratic and to establish progressive priorities not only for the Association, but also for the entire profession. Concern for human and economic rights was an important element in the founding of SRRT and remains an urgent concern today. SRRT believes that libraries and librarians must recognize and help solve social problems and inequities in order to carry out their mandate to work for the common good and bolster democracy. SRRT's main Web site is hosted at <http://libr.org/SRRT>.

[10] The statement is available at the PALIAct Web site, <http://www.seapn.org.uk/PALIAct-new.html>.

[11] This included the following:
- Link-up March 17(1) 2005.
- Pambazuka News 22 June, 2006. Pambazuka News (Pambazuka means arise or awaken in Kiswahili) is a "tool for progressive social change in Africa. Pambazuka News is produced by Fahamu, an organisation that uses information and communication technologies to serve the needs of organisations and social movements that aspire to progressive social change". It is available from: <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category//28705>. Accessed 18 April 2006.
- Newsletter of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. August–September 2005.
- Library & Information Update 4(9), September 2005.
- *IFLA* Journal 31(3) October 2005.
- Library & Information Gazette, December 2006.

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being'.[12] PALIAct seeks to contribute to this through a people-oriented information service run and managed by/on behalf of workers, peasants, pastoralists, fisher people and other marginalised individuals and groups whose information needs have not been met. It aims to develop new services based on equality for all.

An important principle that 'guides PALIAct is that there should be a strong partnership between information professionals and communities and groups. This is to ensure that librarians do not work in isolation as often happens now. At the same time, it is important that whatever new services are developed reflect the real needs of communities as decided by the communities themselves. For this to happen, it is essential that communities are active partners and decision-makers in planning and monitoring services.

As the name of the organisation suggests, PALIAct is made up of activists, not those who talk but take no action. Active participation is essential if real change is to be achieved.

PALIACT recognises the right to relevant information as a basic human right. The struggle for a relevant information service is intimately linked with the political struggles in organising a society that ensures that the material, social, cultural and political needs of the people are met.

Progress and prospects

Following the distribution of the initial statement, a new publication was initiated – *PALIAct Ideas and Action*. the first issue of which is available on the PALIAct Web site.

The response to these initiatives has been encouraging. Based on these, it was decided to pilot two country centres, in Kenya and Ghana. The Kenya centre has elected an interim committee headed by Esther Obachi and has been working on a number of initiatives.

Discussions were held in London on 24 March 2006 with Samuel A. Zan, the Director of the Social Enterprise Development Foundation of West Africa (SEND), Ghana, and Marika Sherwood[13] to explore the possibility of setting up of a Ghana PALIAct Centre.

At the same time, contacts were made with the Network Institute for Global Democratization (NIGD).[14] Mikael Böök,[15] a member of NIGD, wrote to PALIAct suggesting that NIGD could apply for financial support from the Finnish Foreign Ministry to enable one participant from PALIAct to participate in a library-related workshop during the World Social Forum (WSF) in Bamako, Mali, in January 2006. In the event, Esther Obachi and Muthoni Wanjohi from the Kenya PALIAct Centre attended the Forum.

The Kenya PALIAct centre is now on the organising committee of the next WSF forum to be held in January 2007 in Nairobi.

As a follow-up to the discussión at Barnako, PALIAct has taken up the challenge and is organizing a training-of-trainers workshop for librarians in Nairobi in preparation for the 2007 WSF conference. The plan is to train librarians on how the various WSF activities during the conference can be covered so that the information collected could be disseminated through public libraries.

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[12] World Summit on the lnformation Society (WSIS), Declaration of Principles. Available from: <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>. Accessed 14 April 2006.

[13] Marika Sherwood is Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, and the Editor, Black & Asian Studies Association Newsletter.

[14] Details available from NIGD website at <http://www.nigd.org>.

[15] Details of Mikael Böök's work can be found at <http://blogi.kaapeli.fi/book>He can be contacted at <book@kaapeli.fi>.

Some recent developments

- A British PALIAct Support and Advisory Group has been formed to publicise PALIAct activities and to explore ways in which PALIAct centres in Africa can be supported. One of its activities will be to address a meeting of the International Library and Information Group of CILIP on 17 May, 2006.
- A presentation on the theme 'Politics of information and knowledge in Africa: The struggle for an information inclusive society in, a globalised world' will be made at the XVII Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library and Information Professionals (SCECSAL XVII), Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 10–14 July 2006. This will include a section on PALIAct.[16]
- A proposal for greater co-operation between London Metropolitan University's Department of Applied Social Sciences (DASS) and relevant departments of African universities is being prepared and will be further discussed in June–July 2006. Central to this will be the PALIAct and QLP projects as well as joint delivery of a number of modules taught at the London Metropolitan University.

Challenges

In its short life, PALIAct has made much progress and has developed an impressive list of individual and personal supporters. However, the organisation faces major challenges, and it is by no means certain that it will develop as actively as it has done during its first year. Some of these are summarised below.

Mainstreaming PALIAct vision in public libraries

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing PALIAct is that it does not have the active support of public library structures in Africa. These are not only rather marginalised themselves, but they face major problems in keeping afloat. In this context, they have neither the vision, the resources nor the desire to take up the challenges posed to the sector by PALIAct.

PALIAct's greatest strength is the enthusiasm of those who are working actively for its programme. However, their involvement in the organisation is entirely on a voluntary basis, additional to their personal and work commitments. That activists have come forward to join the organisation is an indication of the great need for such an initiative – in libraries as well in communities. But long-term sustainability can be guaranteed only if its vision and activities are mainstreamed within the public library sector in Africa. The political will to do this needs to come from African governments and regional organisations, such as the African Union.

Lack of material resources

PALIAct has no material resources. It has grown up on a very positive vision and the commitment of its supporters around the world, but with no funds. It has tremendous support from communities, as witnessed by the new partnership between local communities, schools, community activists and professionals who came together in Naivasha in Kenya to set up a community information resource centre. Resources in terms of books, materials, computers, software, etc., can hopefully be raised initially from supportive organisations and individuals. The key challenge at the moment is to set up strong organisations in African countries with a group of committed activities. This challenge is well met in Kenya.

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[16] Details about the conference can be found on the inside front cover of this issue of *Focus.*

ICT resources

Communications within Africa and with places outside Africa pose another challenge for PALIAct. While easy access to the lnternet and e-mail is now taken for granted in Europe and the USA, this is not always the case in Africa. Yet activists there are taking advantage of whatever local resources are available in universities and other places to ensure that information is regularly exchanged.

Effective leadership

An important challenge is the development of effective leadership to enable PALIAct to become sustainable. No country, organisation or profession can expect to achieve its vision without developing its members in areas such as appropriate ideological awareness and orientation, an understanding of historical and current contradictions facing the country or organisation, a clarity about who and what their allies are in achieving their goals, and an understanding of organisational change brought about by innovation and creativity.

The development of leadership requires that these theories are then reinforced by opportunities for practical work as a way of gaining experience which can give increased confidence to individuals as well as to organisations. It is only through such life-long learning programmes that there can be any hope of ensuring the sustainability required for long-term development.

DASS has teaching and learning programmes, resources and modules in this area, and will make these available to PALIAct.

Conclusion

While Africa faces a number of problems in developing its people and resources in a meaningful way, it also faces large challenges.

PALIAct can be a small, but crucial, step on a long journey to sustainable development. Going by the commitment of those in Africa already working on the proposal, there is ample ground for optimism.

The key question for people of Europe and USA is whether they can work in partnership with the new generation of African information activists who are the PALIAct pioneers. The Department of Applied Social Sciences has shown its commitment to this process. Let others take a stand too.

SCOLMA Annual Conference 2006

Africa in Libraries – Libraries in Africa

Wednesday 7th June 2006, 9:30 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 28 Russell Square

This year's SCOLMA (Standing Conference on Library Materials on Africa)
conference will focus on two topics: the public promotion of research and writing on
Africa in UK libraries; and the role of libraries and information services in
supporting research and communication amdngst research communities in Africa. .
The conference will be of interest to:
people working or interested in public libraries in the UK;
librarians and researchers on African studies; and
those interested in publishing in or about Africa.
£30 full fee; £10 concessionary rate for students or unwaged; includes lunch.

For further information on the Conference, please contact
Terry Barringer, SCOLMA Secretary, e-mail: <TABarringe@aol.com>

SCECSAL XVII

XVIIth Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library & Information Associations (SCECSAL XVII), Diamond Jubilee Conference Centre, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 10–14 July 2006

The Organizing Committee of the Seventeenth Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library and Information Associations (SCECSAL XVII) has the .pleasure of inviting library and information professionals and others to SCECSAL XVII, to be hosted by the Tanzania Library Association.

The conference will take place in Dar es Salaam from 10 to 14 July 2006, and will draw its participants from the SCECSAL region and across the world. This is the third time that this regional conference will be hosted in the United Republic of Tanzania – the first was its inaugural meeting in 1974 and the second in 1992.

SCECSAL originated from the East African Library Association (EALA), founded in 1957. In 1970, when participating countries dissolved the EALA, they agreed to retain the biennial conference, and countries in the sub-region were invited to attend. Over time, more countries joined the conference, and SCECSAL is now possibly the largest and fastest growing professional association in Africa.

The main theme of SCECSAL XVII is **Libraries** as a **Bridge to an Information and Knowledge Society in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa.** The theme and sub-themes have deliberately been chosen with a view to sharing knowledge, experience and information on important topics that touch the lives of millions of people in the region and beyond.

For more information about SCECSAL XVII, please visit our Web site at <http://scecsal2006.tlatz.org>

Dr Alli Mcharazo
Chairperson
SCECSAL XVII Organizing Committee

Editorial

The first thing you will notice (I hope!) about this issue of *Focus* is a redesign of the layout. If you would like to make any comment about this aspect, please feel free to drop me a line.

The articles in this issue deal with a wide variety of countries, both developed and developing, prosperous and failing, and with contrasting political environments in which library and information services have to operate. The common thread in all these is the commitment of the writers and their colleagues to improving the lot of their communities by enhancing their access to information, and although their specific needs may be vastly different, the basic principles remain the same.

Here you will read about the efforts to introduce and develop new information technologies in India and Nigeria; the struggles to develop even basic infrastructures in Sierra Leone; issues of freedom of information and relevant information needs in Cuba and Africa generally.

But not all are about struggles and 'challenges'. Maureen Stewart talks about the successes and rewards she has found in her library work in Zimbabwe over many years, and a survey of library and information services in countries like Canada can help provide others with a vision of what can ultimately be achieved.

Whatever your particular concerns, I hope that you will find something of interest in this issue of *Focus*. If you feel stimulated by one (or more) of the articles to write a 'Letter to the Editor', I'd love to hear from you. If you're excited, irritated, emboldened, annoyed or motivated by anything you read here, put your virtual pen to virtual paper and send it to me. I'm waiting for your virtual letter to appear in my virtual mailbox!

Roger Stringer

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