

## ADVOCACY FORUM FOR LIBRARIES IN AFRICA: Online Discussions Report

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### INTRODUCTION

1. During the third meeting of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)'s Committee on Development Information (CODI) held from 12 to 17 May 2003, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, librarians attending CODI met and discussed the idea of forming a forum for advocacy for libraries and information services at the highest level on the continent. The Institute of Advocacy defines *advocacy as pursuit of influencing outcomes – including public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic and social systems and institutions – that directly affect people's lives. Advocacy consists of organized efforts and actions based on the reality of "what is". The organized actions seek to highlight critical issues that have been ignored and submerged, to influence public attitudes, and to enact and implement laws and public policies so that visions of "what should be" in a just, decent society becomes a reality.*
2. The meeting in Addis Ababa, attended by librarians from Botswana, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Egypt, Ghana, Tanzania, Zambia and Nigeria, observed that advocacy for libraries and information services on the continent was lacking.
3. It was noted that there are several activities and programmes being implemented on the continent and around the world to which librarians in Africa could provide inputs and influence decisions for the good of libraries and information services on the continent. However, the library professionals are doing not much. Among the activities or programmes that were identified are the following:
  - African Information Society Initiative (AISI)
  - 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
  - Global Campaign for Education
4. It was further noted that even if librarians on the continent were to decide to provide inputs into the above programmes/activities, it would be difficult to speak with one voice since they do not have a forum through which advocacy activities could be conducted.

5. Taking the above views into account, it was agreed in principal that the problem of lack of advocacy for libraries and information services at the highest level in Africa should be addressed as soon as possible. This could be done by forming a library and information services advocacy forum by librarians on the continent. However, it was noted that there are a number of issues that would need to be discussed and sorted out before such a forum could be formed.
6. As a follow up on the Addis Ababa meeting, an online discussion was held from 4th August to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2003. The discussion made use of the DGroup facilities at <http://www.dgroup.org>. Altogether, 20 library and information professionals contributed to the discussions, a large number of which were people who did not participate in the Addis Ababa meeting.

## **OUTCOMES OF THE DISCUSSIONS**

### **Need for an advocacy forum**

7. All the participants who contributed to the discussions supported the idea of establishing a forum that would advocate for libraries and information services in Africa. The objectives of such a forum could be:
  - To provide guidelines on how to lobby governments on the need of libraries in African societies;
  - To enhance sharing of information about fundraising opportunities for libraries, conferences, training opportunities, expertise, etc;
  - To promote and collaborate on research projects, etc;
  - To offer the means and ways of participating in the on-going national, regional and international development forums to give their views in the on-going global issues;
  - To act as a pressure group advocating for fair budgets that would enable libraries in Africa to play an effective role in development;
  - To mobilise and sensitise librarians sufficiently on their supposed social role, by providing opportunities through debates, seminars and workshops;
  - To act as a pressure group to develop library and information system and activities in Africa;
  - To promote use of ICT in libraries and to initiate capacity building programmes.

### **Type of forum and management**

8. Three types of advocacy forums emerged from the contributions to the discussions, and these were an *international library association*, an *Internet-based network/forum*, and an *African library congress*.

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### *International library association*

9. It was proposed that the forum could take the form of an international African library association and the members of the association could meet together in a certain place to decide the nature of advocacy. Unfortunately, operational arrangements of such an association were not outlined.
10. The only major argument advanced against the formation of an African library association was that there are already regional associations on the continent, some of which are doing a good job. This is in addition to the IFLA Africa Section that attempts to bring together library and information professionals from Africa every year during IFLA conferences. Therefore, the existing forums/associations should be strengthened instead of forming new organisations.

### *Internet-based network/forum*

11. Proposals for an Internet-based advocacy network/forum received wide support because it was felt that it would be easier to manage and would facilitate easy communication among potential participants located in various African countries and outside the continent. Facilities for translation of the discussions into French or English should be provided.
12. However, its major drawbacks are that there are still a large number of people in Africa, among them library and information professionals, who do not have ready access to the Internet connectivity. Therefore, this category of library professionals would be marginalised. It was also indicated that in general if there is no active participation on Internet based forums, members tend to easily lose interest in the activities, and this could be the case of such a forum.

### *An African library congress*

13. The need for library and information professionals in Africa to get together, face to face, and discuss issues relating to the welfare of libraries and information services on the continent was the major reason for proposing that the advocacy form could take the form of an African library congress. The Congress, hosted by national library associations on a rotational basis, could be held after every three years.

### **Who should participate?**

14. Regarding participation in the activities of the forum, the general consensus was that any person who is involved and interested in library and information services in Africa should be able to participate.

### **Name of the Forum**

15. The discussion regarding the possible name for the Internet-based forum to be established produced two proposals, and these were:

- Advocacy Forum of Africa for Library and Information (AFALI)
- Library and Information Advocacy Forum for Africa (LIAFA)

16. The name *Library and Information Advocacy Forum for Africa* received support from many participants who contributed on the discussion of the name, and was therefore adopted.

### **Governance**

17. Several suggestions were put forward regarding governance of the proposed Forum. These included affiliations to the:

- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and operate under the proposed Africa Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN);
- IFLA Africa Section
- A regional library association

18. Considering that the Forum was to cater for the entire continent, it was felt by many participants that it should be managed by the IFLA Africa Section. The proposal was presented at the meeting of the IFLA Africa Section Committee held in Gaborone, Botswana in February 2004 and the Committee endorsed the proposal.

### **Records of the Forum**

19. Since the Forum was going to be Internet-based, the consensus was that records of the discussions should be archived on the Web site, and in this regard the Web site of the IFLA Africa Section. This would ensure that there is wide access to the information generated by the Forum.

### **Communication with Target Groups**

20. Advocacy activities should be directed at organisations and institutions which the Forum would like to press upon regarding the importance of libraries and information services in Africa, i.e. African governments, municipal or district councils, etc. Communication with these organisations should be done in various ways including via:

- Official correspondences through letter writing;
- Inviting target groups to workshops at national and regional levels in liaison with national or regional library associations;

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- Participation by representatives of the Forum at various national, regional and international forums;
- Joining online discussion groups targeting decision makers and use them to advocate for libraries and information services on the continent.

## CONCLUSION

21. The major conclusions from the discussions are as follows:

- There is a real need to establish an advocacy forum for libraries and information services in Africa;
- The forum should take the form of an Internet-based network and should be managed by or affiliated to the IFLA Africa Section;
- Participation on the forum should be open to anyone who is interested in libraries and information services in Africa;
- The name of the forum should be *Library and Information Advocacy Forum for Africa (LIAFA)*;
- Records of the discussion carried on the Forum should be archived on the Forum's Web site (i.e. that of the IFLA Africa section); and
- Communication of the results of the discussions to the target audiences should be done using various means, i.e. through letters, workshops, participation at various forums, and discussion groups frequented by the target audiences.

22. Meanwhile, existing library and information forums such as the Standing Conference for Eastern Central and Southern African Library and Information Institutions (SCECSAL), the West African Library Association (WALA) and the IFLA Africa Section, should be strengthened so that they could also take up the role of advocating for libraries and information services on the continent. If need be, these are the forums that could also be used to organise an international conference for library and information professionals in Africa.

23. The meetings of the Committee on Development Information (CODI) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) are held very two years in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and these could be used as a forum at which major issues affecting libraries and information services in Africa could be discussed.

1<sup>st</sup> July 2004