

Abstract

AVLIN will be an operation of the ECA and its collaborators. It can be defined as collaborative of libraries that contribute vision, policy, principles and advocacy realized through computer host sites with information technology infrastructure resources used to deliver library-mediated development information resources. The set of computer applications with internet services provide a point of entry for librarians and the public to resources of African libraries and other networked information.

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The African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN): a regional knowledge exchange initiative

History

In May 1995, at its twenty-first meeting, the ECA Conference of Ministers responsible for economic and social development and planning, by its Resolution 795 (XXX) , entitled “Building Africa’s Information Highway”,^{1/} requested the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to set up a High-Level Working Group (HLWG) on information and communication technologies in Africa. Working in meetings in Cairo, Dakar and Addis Ababa, and electronically, through a listserv, the group produced the document “The African Information Society Initiative (AISI): an action framework to build Africa’s Information and Communication Infrastructure”^{2/}. In May of the following year(1996), the ECA Conference of Ministers again adopted Resolution 812 (XXXI) entitled “Implementation of the African Information Society Initiative (AISI)”^{3/}.

The AISI’s action framework recommended actions for the development of information resources (Infostructure) at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. It specifically recommended that electronic libraries should be developed as one of the value added information services under AISI. It is against these specific recommendations of the AISI that the African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN) project has been conceived and planned to deliver value added impact for ECA’s sub-programme 5: Harnessing information for development. The objective of the sub-programme, which is managed by the Development Information Services Division (DISD), is to strengthen national capacity for harnessing and utilizing information for development, including the application of information and communication technologies in the management and dissemination of bibliographic, factual, sectoral, referral and spatial information in social and economic development. For the biennium 2002-2003, DISD’s expected accomplishments are to provide:

- Increased level of national planning in the field of information for development, including improved policy and regulatory environment for the public and private sector participation in the delivery and application of information for development;
- Improved ability to develop knowledge resources at the regional, sub-regional and national levels; and
- Improve cooperation and networking for sharing social and economic development information among policy makers, researchers, the private sector and all stakeholders involved in development and poverty alleviation.

Background of AVLIN

In September 2001, DISD convened an expert group meeting to consider the viability of establishing a virtual library network for the African region. The group of experts unanimously approved the initiative and made recommendations to the Committee On Development Information (CODI). CODI is one of the statutory bodies which serve as advisory and technical organs of the ECA. At its second meeting, CODI 2 requested the Executive Secretary of the ECA to provide seed money to kick start AVLIN. Since then, efforts have been directed at preparatory activities aimed at formally launching AVLIN.

Concept and Vision of AVLIN

AVLIN is one of the programme instruments which has been designed to contribute to the DISD’s objectives and expected accomplishments. Its core activity is knowledge and information networking. It is planned to be:

- a network of internet-based information and knowledge resources and services;

- a web of virtual libraries and knowledge exchanges relevant to African development issues. Within this context, the ECA Library, under the AVLIN umbrella, will link African libraries and be accessible to the people of the region and others engaged in African development sectors. It will develop a range of subject gateways around the special development concerns for which the ECA has the regional mandate and provides advocacy to its member states;
- a platform and hub for the exchange of knowledge and information among researchers and policy makers.

Through the DISD, the ECA is intensifying its information and knowledge sharing activities which not only support the research needs and requirements of the ECA itself, but also, and more importantly, help to provide capacities in our member states to better acquire and utilize Africa's accumulated development information resources as decision and policy support mechanisms.

The ECA Library, established in 1959, with its much currently enhanced information management platform, is serving as a lead service component in this effort. With its on-line catalogue, unique collections of socio-economic planning and policy information materials, as well as a projected training scheme to promote agreements on the acquisition and utilization of common standards and protocols for bibliographic and knowledge exchanges, is facilitating the process for the development of digital collections for key subject areas (subject gateways) covered within the programmes executed by the ECA. On a biennial basis, the ECA organizes African Development Forum (ADF) sessions to deal with topical concerns of the region-for example, gender and development, globalization and information, HIV/AIDS, and regional integration. The next ADF session will have as its theme governance. It is the plan of the ECA Library to digitalize the publications (flagships, parliamentary documents etc) emanating from these forums and to share the accumulated development information resources to institutions in the region via the internet and other channels.

Objectives

AVLIN's overarching objective would be to help bridge the digital divide between Africa and the developed world as well as bring about effective information and knowledge networking among African knowledge-based institutions.

These objectives will be achieved through some of these specific actions:

- providing access to e-books, policy documents, bibliographic databases, general information and expert and institutional profiles;
- building capacity at institutional, national and regional levels on development of integrated virtual library services;
- promoting regional cooperation on standardization and virtual library system development; and
- facilitating research and developmental activities in both infrastructure and development of digital and virtual libraries.

Membership

The following criteria for membership will guide participation in the network:

- AVLIN will be composed of libraries, information and documentation centres, systems, clearing-houses, research institutions, agencies and institutions in the African Region that are interested in promoting knowledge sharing and networking activities in the development field;
- Members may be representatives of university/academic and research institutions at the national, sub-regional or regional level in the African Region;
- Associate or affiliate membership shall be open to centres, information systems and networks outside the African Region which may have some special contributions to make towards the advancement of the goals of AVLIN.

All categories of members of the network shall be expected to:

- actively co-operate with other network members to promote better ways of identifying and improving the flow of development information within the region;
- institute co-operative arrangements to facilitate the strengthening of development information activities;
- agree to utilize, whenever possible, those standards for information exchange adopted for the use of network members;
- ensure appropriate physical and human capacities for active participation in AVLIN and be responsible for providing content and related input into the network;
- provide the AVLIN Secretariat with information on their respective development information activities as they pertain to the development and implementation of digital and virtual libraries;
- contribute information for inclusion in AVLIN promotional activities and publications (including the AVLIN newsletter);
- share information, knowledge, experiences and expertise to the extent possible;
- establish and maintain the infrastructures necessary for promoting the overall aims and objectives of AVLIN.

Governance

Overall guidance and direction for the effective implementation of the network will be provided by the AVLIN Advisory Committee (AAC). The Committee, whose members will be selected in their personal, professional capacities, will meet at agreed intervals to conduct the business of the network and will approve programmes, projects, funding, technical operational issues and other agendas which may be referred to it. It will advise the ECA through CODI on necessary follow-up actions.

The AVLIN Secretariat will implement the following support functions, among others:

- It will assess, review the availability of appropriate ICTs in sample institutions, and establish both the human and physical capacities that exist in potential institutions for the support of the network;
- It will prepare background papers, present progress reports, implementation plans and other documentation etc. for submission to the AVLIN Advisory Committee, CODI and other bodies, for their review and guidance, using consultants and other experts as may be necessary;
- It will organize AAC meetings, as well as workshops for selected participating institutions and experts in the area of social and economic information development and management to promote both human and physical capacities;
- Prepare proposals for donor funding and seek funds as appropriate; and
- Periodically monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and instruments applied in the execution of the project and provide perspectives and guides for possible improvements in the networking approaches and intervention methods used.

Complementarity and Co-ordination

Implementation efforts will seek to ensure seamless complementarity with institutional knowledge based projects and initiatives. In order to provide a continuous link between African research networks, policy makers and training institutions (mainly Universities) as well as to support African centres of expertise and knowledge pools, the African Knowledge Networks Forum (AKNF) has been created at the ECA. It is expected that AKNF will provide an enabling environment of existing knowledge bases which will eventually strengthen the indigenous and institutional capacity for policy oriented research and analysis for more effective use by Africa's decision makers. AVLIN is already closely collaborating with AKNF to survey existing intellectual and physical infrastructural capacities at selected African institutions. The information gained will determine the elements for the development of future knowledge resource hubs to be harnessed and supported.

Also being championed by the ECA are efforts to support information technology acquisition, utilization and capacity building. The Information Technology Centre (ITCA), which is also managed by the DISD, has made great strides in providing a centre for training, permanent exhibitions and the establishment of portals through which development information on key sectors can be accessed via the internet throughout the region.

The ECA's five Sub-Regional Development Centres (SRDCs), located as they are in various parts of the Africa region, will provide critical inputs for the identification, selection and the implementation of joint activities with sub-regional institutions and centres of excellence which might eventually become affiliated with AVLIN.

Partnership Arrangements

Within the Africa region, it will work in tandem, with regional organizations such as the Africa Union (AU), the African Development Bank (ADB) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, particularly the Africa Section). Close consultation is already in place with the libraries of the AU and the ADB for collaboration in the establishment of their electronic libraries, using as far as possible, compatible standards, systems, networks and knowledge exchanges.

The project will also work closely with organizations that have known interest in development information and institutional networking, like the International Development Research Centre (IDRC of Canada), The Carnegie Corporation (New York), the European Union (EU), UNESCO, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The Joint World Bank / IMF Library, the UN System Electronic Information Acquisition Consortium (UNSEIAC) and other Networks and Consortia. Co-operation with other international and multilateral knowledge-producing centres of excellence in the development sector will also be sought.

Implementation Plans

Operational Framework

AVLIN will be a collaborative project of the ECA, other interested regional institutions, and the African library community. Ownership of content, hardware, in-house software, operational strategies and human resources will however, be vested in partners and participants. ECA's role will be facilitative and integrative. Implementation efforts will seek to ensure neat complementarity with related projects and initiatives, for example, the African Digital Library.

Main focus will be on: capacity building at institutional, national and regional levels; regional cooperation on standardization and system development; and facilitation of research and developmental activities in both infrastructure and development of digital and virtual libraries.

Technical Framework

AVLIN will be a distributed network, meaning that its databases of information resources will not all be loaded onto a computer system of a single institution. Available databases, digital libraries and other information resources and services will be housed and operated locally, but connected to the internet.

AVLIN will provide the necessary interfaces, including powerful search engines, collaborative software (knowledge exchange engines), and links to a variety of information objects. Information related to the various economic and social sectors will be covered including agriculture, gender and development, population, education, transport and communications, health and environment, regional integration and other developmental concerns facing the African region.

Proposed Long-term Implementation Plans

Phase	Time Frame	Remarks
Conceptualization - preparation of concept paper, - Pre-CODI expert group meeting on AVLIN and consideration at CODI-2.	January 1999 to September 2001	Completed Done in September 2001
Preparatory Activities - Feasibility studies, - Preparation of task brief and business plan; - Setting up of an AVLIN Advisory Committee (AAC), - Selection of AAC members, - Preparation of guidelines for membership and other aspects of implementation, - Inaugural meeting of AAC, - Capacity building workshop, - Identification of, and contact with Partners and Pilot institutions, - Fundraising activities begin.	September 2001 to December 2002 Nov./ Dec. 2002 November 2002	ECA to provide seed funds. Preparatory activities are at different stages of progress
Pilot Implementation Phase begins - Second meeting of the AAC,	January 2003 March/April 2003 (to coincide with CODI 3)	Pilot may include at least 2 institutions per sub-region and should involve libraries from various levels of ICT development.
Evaluation of Pilot Phase - Evaluation studies and report completed, and - CODI-3 considers report.	June 2003 to September 2003	A governance activity.
Full Implementation - Third meeting of AAC, - Full implementation plan completed, and - Actual implementation activities begin.	January 2004	This will depend on conclusions reached after the Pilot phase.
Progress Report	June 2004 to September 2004	
Full Project Review	September 2005	

Indicators of success of AVLIN

Indicators of success will include:

- Number of library and information network nodes established;
- Number of knowledge exchanges and knowledge institutions connected with web-based library networks;
- Number and quality of capacity building training, meetings and workshops held; and
- Increase in adoption and adherence to international standards on information processing, management and dissemination.

Conclusion

AVLIN has been conceptualized as a mechanism for connecting libraries of key African information and knowledge producing centres and institutions in the development sector. This network, which is anchored on ECA's library, is a major challenge for the African region and will help to integrate Africa into the world wide networks in order to gain access to, and add content to the global body of information and knowledge resources on development issues.

The role of librarians in brokering this critical transition cannot be overemphasized. By their training and professional commitment they are best primed to provide leadership and add value to such efforts. If the AISI is to fulfill its goals by 2010 as projected, African libraries and librarians have to actively assist in creating African content and to share this resource to help bridge the digital divide. AVLIN should be embraced not just as a concept but as a realistic tool for knowledge resource sharing in our countries.

As noted by the Executive Secretary of the ECA, "Africa should not miss out on development opportunities presented by the information revolution....AISII presents the chance for Africa to leap forward and join the global information society for the social and economic empowerment it can bring". 4/ AVLIN will help to empower our knowledge institutions with the planning and policy information instruments critical to insuring appropriate decision making.

References

1. UNECA: Resolution 795 (XXX): Building Africa's Information Highway, Addis Ababa, May 1995.
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4. Amoako, K.Y. : Foreword – AISI promotional brochure, 1996.