

CPR RESPONSE FORUM

Knowledge Banks for the Commons from the African Perspective

By Joseph Bahati

Faculty of Forestry and Nature Conservation

Makerere University, Uganda

Stand early one morning, at the side of a major road outside of any regional town in almost any country, and you will still probably see a library van chugging out for its rounds of nearby villages for the day, set to return at sundown. Be it in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Kenya, or Ghana.

In most towns today, you find one or more libraries, their modest collections outshone by their ambition, their few dozen or so titles much coveted by their users. Such local initiatives occupy a special place in the constellation of world libraries, alongside some legendary libraries of much greater size, such as the one at Indiana University.

In Alexandria in Egypt, for example, the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina was opened in October 2002 on or near the site of the ancient one, which aimed to serve humanity from 295 BC to the early 5th century AD. It shares some goals with the ancient library: a focal point for research, the advancement of knowledge and the open exchange of ideas, but not for storing every book in the world, that will happen one day in a place called the Internet.

Alternatively, in Timbuktu, Mali, work is in progress on preserving 20,000 books, many scientific and agricultural and dating from the 13th century, that are stored in the Ahmed Baba Center for Advanced Islamic Studies. Electronic copies will be available on the Internet. Just as these books recall the depth of Islamic scientific enlightenment, so the 8th century Stift in St. Gallen, Switzerland, with its illumination scientific books, is a reminder of how libraries run by monks served as a refuge for knowledge in Europe's Dark Age.

While most people in society value libraries, few value librarians. However, with the onset of the digital age, this century-old paradox is changing, as these information professionals throw off their meek image and start to assert themselves. For example, from the International Association of Agricultural Information Specialists, librarians are catching up with the task of becoming service-oriented, raising standards and seeking financial sustainability. In Africa today, there is a paradox of democratization and decentralization regarding the commons. These processes are drawing inspiration from the library-stored records of the struggles of our predecessors.

The spread of the information and communication technologies (ICT) has led many untrained people to believe that they can organize their information and find out about anything, anywhere, on the Internet. In theory, yes, but only if the information searcher knows how to search. Besides, Internet facilities are not yet common in most parts of Africa. Therefore, all this calls for more, and not less, use of the librarian's toolbox of classification systems, thesaurus and abstracting skills and programming intelligent searches. With the growth of informal, community-based libraries, the challenge for information professionals, especially in Africa, is to share skills with the different users in ICT. After the initial excitement of plugging into world-wide networks, the user comes to the realization that it is not just a question of access but, increasingly, of being able to select information.

In the African perspective, there are many bridges to cross along the library's path into the future. But while we must worry about selection skills, let us cross one bridge at a time. Community residents must first be taught how to read and write. There is quite an enormous amount of indigenous information that they would love to share. Unfortunately, indigenous information, and therefore the accrued memory, tends not to be valued by its holders. They may either believe the experience is common knowledge or, at the other extreme, insist that culture dictates that it be retained as a sacred trust to be passed only to the select, as part of heritage. Yet, such indigenous and local information is valid and has potential value to a wider community, if only distributed and shared.

The greatest challenge is to change the culture of information sharing to benefit the global commons so that the global commons appreciate that the sharing of knowledge is enriching to trustees, global commons, and future generations.

There is an enormous amount of information in Africa that would benefit the trustees, global commons, and future generations if documented and shared. I agree with David Bollier that commons help identify roles, behaviors and relationships that cannot be adequately expressed by market theory alone. Everyone must be either a producer or a consumer at different times and situations.

jbahati@starcom.co.ug