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Diso, Lukman Ibraheem

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Policies for digital libraries and archives in Africa: developing strategies for access to knowledge for development

Lukman Ibraheem Diso
Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria
Email:lidisoq01@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The paper highlights the strategic role of regional and national policies for digital libraries and archives in promoting access to knowledge for development in Africa. It views regional/national information policies as general frameworks and contexts within which policies for digital libraries and archives are situated. It recognizes, however, the need to highlight the latter as instruments for effective access to, and sharing of, knowledge in the contemporary world in which increasing dependence on digital technology makes the effective participation of digitally deficient nations virtually impossible. The paper provides an overview of the existing provisions in terms of laws, policies, agencies, institutions, facilities and such information/information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructures that are supposed to be the basis for developing national and regional links for resource sharing. It identifies and analyses the dilemma in achieving the set objectives of African information policies. While this dilemma, rooted in the political, economic and socio-cultural factors, operates at different, specific levels, these factors combine to constitute an obstacle to national and regional coordination and cooperation. Without coordination, effective resource sharing at global level is severely constrained. Hence the paper suggests strategies of formulating and coordinating the implementation of comprehensive regional and national policies for the development of digital libraries and archives in Africa, thus ensuring effective preservation of, and access to, African resources, and enabling resource sharing between Africans as well as on the global scale. The paper concludes by stressing that neither the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) nor the entire development agenda of Africa can be achieved without developing a strong and sustainable knowledge base by establishing a powerful and enduring backbone of information infrastructures capable of creating links for effective intra and inter-continental sharing of knowledge resources. The paper therefore recommends the setting up of a coordinating agency under the African Union (AU), to develop a policy framework on the basis of various existing national policies and to monitor and coordinate implementation at various levels.

Keywords: Africa – digital libraries – policies; Africa – archives – policies; Access to knowledge – policies; Archives – policies; Knowledge and development – policies.

Introduction

The reality of the "Digital Divide" manifests in the deepening crisis that characterizes access, processing, preservation and sharing of information/knowledge in Africa. Because knowledge is generally not given priority in Africa, instruments for its production, access, processing and preservation suffer serious neglect. "Overall, Africa has one of the weakest information and communication infrastructures in the world, characterized by limited geographical coverage and bandwidth, poor interconnectivity among countries and low quality of services" (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2005:6). Therefore, African information institutions, such as libraries and archives) logically suffer serious neglect, as a result of which they are still largely traditional despite the digital revolution that has transformed them and their functional roles elsewhere. How can African countries develop policies and strategies for bridging the digital gaps to enable their information institutions, specifically libraries and archives, to provide effective access, sharing and preservation of knowledge for development?

It is with respect to this that this paper attempts to examine:

- The provisions made, in terms of laws, policies, agencies, institutions and infrastructures that serve as a basis for knowledge sharing in Africa;
- African information policies as general frameworks for policies on digital libraries and archives; and
- The elements that constitute the dilemma in achieving the objectives of effective knowledge sharing in Africa, and the immense potentials that can be harnessed to tackle the challenge.

The paper further proposes how to formulate and coordinate the implementation of comprehensive policies and strategies for developing digital libraries and archives in Africa. It is imperative indeed to stress the inherent dangers in the attempt to realize the entire development agenda of Africa (Millennium Development Goals) without a strong and sustainable knowledge-sharing base. Such a base is possible only when comprehensive, consistent and well articulated policies have been put in place. In view of all this, the paper recommends the establishment of a coordinating agency under the African Union (AU) to develop such a policy framework based on the existing policies, and to coordinate and monitor its implementation at all levels.

Overview of Current Provision and Infrastructure

Africa has great potential to develop sound and sustainable knowledge base through accessible digital library and archival services throughout the continent. Despite this potential, Africa's ability to develop effective information policy instruments at national or

regional level is seriously constrained. In most cases, such policy instruments are non-existent. Where they exist, they are mostly characterized by:

- Fragmentation (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2005:15): disparate policy instruments on ICTs, on telecommunications, on government information and similar areas, and the absence of a comprehensive framework for information production, management, transfer, access, utilization and infrastructure;
- Irrelevance/non-relevance: addressing neither the actual short term development needs of the various segments of the people, nor the long-term agenda for overall national or regional development;
- Poor implementation mechanisms: poor logistics, poor allocation of resources (underfunding), and duplication of and conflict between implementation agencies; and
- Lack of policy review instruments that are capable of responding to the changing environment and situations.

Sound policies do however exist at regional and sub-regional levels, and these can be coordinated and used as frameworks for comprehensive information policies for the continent. They include:

- Broad based national information policies already developed by some African countries. Although such countries are few (with South Africa taking the lead), the policies serve a useful purpose in developing a continental framework;
- The African Regional Action Plan on the Knowledge Economy (ARAPKE), inclusive of the "Accra commitments for Tunis 2005" component (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2005:1): this is a framework for action to galvanize the African information environment and launch Africa into the information society. It was developed by the AU and coordinated by the ECA. ARAPKE is a strategic and necessary reference tool for any information policy framework to be developed for Africa.

There are other frameworks, within which context ARAPKE was developed, which include\

- The African Information Society Initiative (AISI) (Bahrul Islam, 2007:101), which promises a sustainable information society in Africa by 2010;
- The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) (Schwabe, 2004:95), under the AU, which commits itself to ICT revolution in Africa, and subsequent integration of Africa into the new information society;
- World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) (Girard & Siochru, 2003) Declaration that commits itself to creating an all- inclusive society where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge.
- The Committee on Development Information-Knowledge, Libraries & Information Services (CODI-KLIS) has also developed important guidelines and strategies which need to be incorporated in any comprehensive policies for developing knowledge networking and sharing in Africa. The subcommittee aims at proposing and advocating knowledge policies and strategies for Africa's development and

> ... raising of awareness of the value of libraries, knowledge and information in economic growth and human development; promotion of the

> development of national knowledge systems in member states; identifying priority issues in information and knowledge policies and institutions; examining and reviewing progress made by member states; facilitating capacity building with regard to development of systems and services for the Information Society and knowledge economy; reviewing recent and proven technical trends and status of knowledge and information practices in global context; developing and supporting the establishment of national, regional and global networks and partnerships; and reviewing of ECA work programme in the area. (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2005:17).

In terms of information infrastructure, physical and virtual structures and facilities, Africa has made some modest progress, which, with some resuscitation or upgrading, as the case may be, could easily be converted to serve as platforms for developing digital libraries and archives in Africa. They include:

- The National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI), which has been completed in more than half of African countries with report of good progress in more than two-thirds of others (Azubuike,2007:187). NICI has been established to facilitate the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and launch Africa into the information society;
- The African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN) (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2005:17) - The ECA Library. Membership of AVLIN is open and free to all Africans and its online services are accessible globally;
- The Regional Informatics Network for Africa (RINAF) developed by the Intergovernmental Information Programmes (IPP) of UNESCO to provide internet services to several African countries with plans for five regional and ten national nodes. According to the plan five regional and ten national nodes were to be established with the central African regional node located at NACETEM, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, in Nigeria (Filani, 2002:8);
- The satellite-based Cooperative Information Network (COPINE) initiative which initially linked scientists in 12 African countries and selected hospitals, universities/institutions and documentation/ information supply centres. COPINE's interactive capability enhances information sharing and collaboration among African scientists, researchers and professionals and offers "full and open access to the depository of libraries of regional and global scientific and technological information networks..." (Filani, 2002:7); and the Pan Africa Development Information System (PADIS) CABECA (Capacity Building for Electronic Communication in Africa), which is a UNECA project to promote computer networking throughout Africa (Filani, 2002:8).

There are many other factors that favour Africa and help to facilitate the development of the above with positive implications for the economics of developing networking infrastructure and facilities in Africa. They include

- Geography/topography that permits easy mobility;
- Abundant human and natural resources that can easily be harnessed and mobilized for development purposes;
- Relatively Stable / predictable weather/climatic conditions and relative freedom from natural disasters; and
- Diverse cultures with rich indigenous knowledge resources.

The Structural Dilemma

Despite the immense potentials of Africa, the continent is generally riddled with problems that must be addressed in order to develop effective strategies for knowledge networking and sharing. These include:

- Socio-political and economic instability, including poor governance, conflicts, weak civil society, low capacity utilization and underdeveloped economies;
- Poor education systems: underfunding, poor policies, high illiteracy rates, low research capacity, declining quality of learning, poor facilities;
- Poor ICT culture: general lack of capacity to use and adapt to local needs, poor application/local content development, low internet access capacity (low speed/broadband penetration). The comparison of broadband subscription between the continents, as provided by the International Telecommunications Union (International Telecommunications Union, 2007) below, is both illustrative and instructive.

Africa	0.5%
Oceania	1.6%
Americas	30.5%
Europe	33.7%
Asia	38.3%

- Lack of coordination at all levels (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2005:16), local, regional and national, characterized by:
  - Duplication of institutions, agencies, policies and infrastructures;
  - Fragmentation of similar or same functions and responsibilities into different structures
  - Conflicting legislations; and
  - General lack of institutional collaboration/linkages, networking and resource sharing.

- Underdeveloped information environment characterized by:
  - Poorly funded information institutions (libraries, archives, etc) (ECA,2003:8);
  - Low information mobility-poor transportation, power and telecommunication systems, poorly and irregularly organized interactive forums (debates, symposia, conferences, discussions, rallies, seminars, etc);
  - Poor reading and information-seeking culture, low literacy rates; and
  - Generally unfavourable government attitude to development information.

- Neglect of the under-privileged groups, including the disabled, inmates, the elderly, rural communities and the urban poor, in terms of information provision.

The above elements are the factors that necessarily inform the conception, formulation, implementation and review of policies on digital libraries and archives in Africa.

Strategies and Policies for Digital Libraries and Archives

Based on the above discussions, SWOT analysis is the first step in developing strategies and policies. In this respect, each of the SWOT elements can be analyzed as follows:

- The strengths of the continent lie in its existing infrastructure, natural resources, good terrain, good climate and trainable manpower;
- The weaknesses include lack of coordination, poor resource management, poor information environment, and poor ICT culture.
- The opportunities include abundant human and mineral resource potentials; and
- The threats are rooted in political and economic instability, poor governance and high illiteracy rates.

Based on this conceptualization and the thorough analysis of all the elements involved, especially the human elements (information needs and seeking behaviours, demographic profiling, and human resources and institutional capacity), the proposed agency set up by the AU should formulate a comprehensive, consistent and well articulated policy on digital libraries and archives for the continent, taking into account the following as the necessary consideration, assessment and provision to be made for an all-inclusive framework.

- Level of infrastructures required;
- Existing infrastructures to be used;
- Location and spread of infrastructures for accessibility;
- Connectivity to different institutions across the continent;
- Level of different categories of personnel required;
- Diversity of cultures, languages, literacy level and other demographic characteristics across the continent;
- Sustainability of the project/roles of member countries;
- Relevant agencies/institutions/organizations to be involved;
- Take off of the project – when? How?
- Nature of services to be provided and conditions for access;
- Funding levels required (initial and sustained investments);
- General and sectoral implementation procedures, strategies and schedule/time frame;
- Policy review procedures and schedule/ time frame;
- Publicity and sensitization;
- Legislation.

The content of the policy document should be structured based on the elements below:

- Vision, mission and objectives of the project must be clearly stated;
- Identification of the various communities to benefit from the services;
- Scope and limitation of the project;
- The composition of the implementation monitoring and coordinating agency;

– Review process.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the processes of developing a comprehensive policy framework and strategies for digital libraries and archives in Africa. Developing such a policy and strategies at continental level is one way of addressing the challenges of the "digital divide" and poor access to, and sharing of, information, especially development information, which confronts the African continent. The paper recognizes the need to address policy issues at a continental level as the most effective strategy to face up to this challenge comprehensively. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the policy instrument in both content and operation, the paper recommends:

- that an agency be set up by the African Union (AU) to develop a comprehensive policy framework for digital libraries and archives for the African continent, and to coordinate and monitor its implementation in member states;
- that it is imperative to emphasize in the policy instrument the necessity of democratizing access to knowledge/information by developing mechanisms for, and ensuring effective collaboration, networking and vigorous publicity and public sensitization;
- The upgrading of AVLIN so that it serves as the central node given its strategic position and the structures it already has in place;
- African nations should recognize the strategic importance of adopting the continental policy instrument as a basis for their national framework, especially where such policies do not exist; and
- The recognition of the necessity to emphasize the dissemination of development information and indigenous knowledge produced in Africa and elsewhere.

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