

NEW DIMENSIONS FOR LIBRARY SERVICES IN GHANA *

MATILDA AMISSAH-ARTHUR
Library and Information Consultant
Accra, Ghana

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

In recent years the priority that was given to libraries has been substantially reduced in the face of competing social needs, increasing economic and changing government fiscal policies. Despite these, libraries are expected to be cost-effective in order to ensure the maximization of the use of their resources. Faced with the declining levels of financial support and the rising demand for accountability, libraries are under pressure to re-examine their operations and priorities.

Acquisition budgets (in dollar terms) now no longer increase as they have done in the past. World publication is still increasing and the inflationary rate for books and journals and other library materials is also increasing. This means that the purchasing power of libraries will actually decline fairly substantially in the years ahead. In the same way the budget for staff, equipment and other supplies will also decrease. In the face of these pressures, libraries will have to ensure that their operations; acquisitions, cataloguing, circulation and stock management are functioning not only efficiently and effectively but also at a lower cost. This means that some of the procedures may have to be streamlined, du-

plicative effort eliminated and standardization adopted and implemented.

Automation has been viewed as a significant potential means of reducing library operating costs. Capital investment may take several years to recover. But when the system is installed it should be able to absorb additional work at little increased cost. Usually, the unit cost of additional work should drop. In developing countries, automation has now become an unavoidable option. There is a growing awareness of the capability of the computer in performing library duties which manual systems have not performed satisfactorily. The success of the On-line Computer Library Centre Inc. (OCLC) in North America is a clear indication of the value of co-operation, and standardization in increasing library cost-effectiveness and efficiency.

Governments the world over are seeking economic salvation. The essentialness of books to the development of any nation in the modern world is no longer in doubt. Thus most nations with the right sense of priorities devote reasonable attention to the library and books in general. This is important because it is in books that ideas are refined and documented; and it is also in books that the appropriate perspectives on the economy, poli-

tics, religion and culture and social efforts are also documented. There is also a lot of talk about sustainable development. Only a cultivated mind can work for sustainable development. Information is critical to the cultivation of the mind. The library is able to make a great impact/contribution towards the country's growth. Our parliament library for example, if well equipped should be able to make available to all parliamentarians information on all subjects and areas to enable them perform in all their deliberations.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

In Ghana the Ghana Library Board (GLB) is the sole body authorized by law to set up and run libraries. Over the years the GLB has been responsible for public and school libraries. In 1994 the district councils were also by law authorized to set up and run libraries in their districts together with the GLB. Looking at what is happening one wonders if there are clear lines of operation between the two bodies. One also wonders how well both bodies are cooperating in the setting up and running of district libraries? With regard to this and other issues such as the national library as well as the role of the GLB now in the country the GLB Act needs to be revised.

The name Ghana Library Board is also a cause of worry not only among library professionals but the general public as well. At the mention of the name some people think it is the management board. Others think it is the professional association. Time and again letters meant for the association are taken there as well as the GLB being invited to represent the association. With regard to the role it is playing now, "**Ghana Library Serv-**

ices" or "**Ghana National Library Service**" would be a much less confusing name. As the body responsible for establishing libraries in the country we all depend on it in several ways. It is the largest employer of librarians in the country but for the past two decades it has not employed any substantial number of librarians. In fact it has not been able to fill its establishment for professional librarians. Sadly enough, even the few who find their way there leave after two or three years. For some reasons the Ghana Library Board is not able to retain its professional librarians. In 1975 with 20 service points the GLB had 35 professional librarians. Then, their projections for the year 2000 showed that they were working towards having 500 professional librarians. In 1997 GLB has 60 service points and 12 professional librarians. **This is a matter of grave concern to the Ghana Library Association.** Added to this is the fact that for several years it did not have a Board of Directors as well as a substantive director. It now has a substantive director but not a Board. Considering the new perspective of public libraries and new trends in the library and information services, the GLB needs to reassess itself in order to redirect its efforts to its real role in society.

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our educational system is undergoing re-evaluation, which includes analysing the social relevance of our educational programmes. The introduction of the Junior Secondary School (JSS) and Senior Secondary School (SSS) concept requires that school libraries be reorganized to meet the demands of the new system. How many second cycle schools have libraries? Years ago the

Aburi Girls Secondary School library was set up as a model library by the Ministry of Education. Since then how many other second cycle school libraries have been raised to that level? And what has happened to the model library itself? The GLB is in charge of second cycle school libraries. One wonders if it is well equipped for this task. Over the years the GLB has not been able to adequately provide for, train and supervise school libraries. Most of the libraries in the second cycle schools are manned by clerks and in a few cases teachers who love reading. Some training is run each year by the GLB for the "Librarians" from the schools. But what good is library training to a clerk? What good is library training to someone who has no library to operate?

We are talking about fallen standards in our second cycle schools - students not having any reading habits. How can the students acquire any reading habits when they have not been exposed to books? Maybe it is time to take another look at the school libraries: their setup, operation and supervision.

Ghana has always depended heavily on importation of tertiary level books. In the sciences, engineering, agriculture, medicine and technology, importation of foreign books is 100%. Even in the humanities and the social sciences, many textbooks which are regarded as "core" textbooks and which are in very high demand are published overseas.

Loans are negotiated by government with the World Bank and other donor agencies to import books for the university libraries. Although these are laudable, they do not present lasting solutions to the problems of the librar-

ies. Most of the time these are a "once and for all" affair. The books come in multiples - sometimes as many as 14 copies of a title. Since this effort is not sustained the libraries never really benefit from the offer.

Tertiary institution libraries need to build live vibrant collections to support teaching and research. It is a pity very little research is done here because of the unavailability of current up-to-date books and information. Considering the alarming rate at which world publication is increasing, our tertiary institution libraries need to move away from books to non book materials in the areas where CD-ROM, disks, microfiche etc. are available. They are in the long run cheaper than the multi volume books.

The tertiary institutions are all embarking on a grand computerization project. Management Information Systems (MIS) are being put in place in each of the institutions. The libraries have so far not been left out and there is talk that they will be fitted in. One needs to be very cautious here. A computerized library application programme is very different from an accounting or administrative application programme. The factors in play in the library are totally different - acquisition, cataloguing, circulation and stock management. These require absolutely different approaches than the pure accounting and administrative procedures the rest of the faculties/departments are engaged in. It therefore calls for an understanding of the library procedures to be able to translate them into computer programmes.

In the case where the original MIS did not have a library module and did not also have

the library in mind when being developed it even becomes extremely difficult. This is because there already exists a system, and designing another module which is entirely different to become part of it is not easy. Added to this is the cost factor; writing completely new programmes and building new systems are expensive. There are lots of library application software on the market. Some of them have been used for years and updated several times.

A library is much better off buying a software that has been proven useful than going through the problems of developing one or even adapting an existing one to suit its purpose. The time, money and risk involved are too much.

The Ministry of Education should as much as possible involve librarians not at later stages but at the onset of such projects. It is during the preparatory stage; the feasibility stage that the librarians will make their input and let them know how different library procedures are from the rest of the institution's procedures. In spite of the fact that the MIS has reached an advanced stage it is advisable to listen to the librarians - (the users of the system). It is they who will use the system and so must be involved in its development. If this is not done, precious hard earned foreign currency would be thrown down the drain because the system that will evolve will not be suitable for the libraries. The library system need not be an integrated part of the MIS: it could be a completely new system solely for the libraries and not based on any of the already existing programmes or databases.

The distance education programme is about

to take off and a lot of work has been done. It is a pity libraries have been completely left out. How can we talk of any form of education without the mention/thinking of libraries? There has been no input from the GLB, the Ghana Library Association or the university libraries. This is a very serious mistake and steps should be taken to rectify it. The distance education programme cannot and would not be able to survive without libraries. Libraries are the pivot of education.

At the end of April 1997, World Space held an international conference in Accra. The theme was "Opening new frontiers for learning". The subject was how to use radio to spread education and information rapidly and cheaply throughout the length and breadth of Africa.

The founder of World Space, Noah Samara, founded World Space in 1990 with a single vision: how to change the present dearth of information in Africa into an affluence of information. His solution has involved the creation of one of the most advanced satellite and digital broadcasting systems the world has known. What World has set out to do is to completely revolutionize access to information. For the present it is concentrating on Africa and Ghana seems to be one of their choice of countries. The implications of the way World Space is going to revolutionize access to information are mind-boggling.

In less than two decades, the information age has changed our world beyond all recognition and is continuing the process of change even as I read these lines to you. Today, he who has information is king. The uninformed are like an army of spear-carriers engaged

in battle against supersonic jets and cruise missiles.

Ghana's educational reform has gone some way and the success of the educational policies depends to a great extent on the utilization of information. Thus the availability of such information is imperative to both the educational and national development of the country. This is where libraries come in as centers for information. If well equipped and managed, libraries can contribute fully to the development of the country. Planners will be able to find in the libraries information relating to their work to assist them in decision making.

For years the United States Information Services (USIS) and the British Council have run excellent libraries that are highly patronized by students of tertiary institutions. In fact about 70% of the users were students from tertiary institutions. A couple of years ago the USIS revised its library policy and closed its doors to undergraduates. Now only students engaged in serious research can be members of the Martin Luther King Jnr. library. Now there is talk about the British Council also revising its membership policy to exclude undergraduates. The implications for our students in tertiary educational institutions are very grave indeed. But we cannot blame these development agencies - we have to develop our libraries and take care of the gap that would be created. We cannot forever rely on others to help us out - we must help ourselves.

TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

There is a serious shift from print to media

oriented institutions. Can we sit and watch technology pass us by? Formerly libraries existed as separate entities, then audio-visual departments started to develop either separately or as part of the library. It was possible, for a while for librarians to think, "that is not my responsibility", and shove the newer and strange looking material over to the AV man. Today, it is no longer possible to avoid the responsibility: for better for worse, we now share the 'turf' of the new technology with the media specialists.

The computer revolution is a fact of life in Ghana now! Automation is beginning to have a significant impact on industries, business and institutions and on the personal and work life of the individual. The revolution applies as fully to libraries and the library employees as to any segment of society. The computer has proven useful in helping to solve the following problems :

1. increased workload
2. need for greater efficiency
3. need for new services
4. co-operation and centralization
5. cost containment
6. provision of up-to-date management information

We in Ghana are now seeing a rapid improvement in our telecommunication system. Is this not an opportunity to think computer? Now most of the top computer firms are represented here: IBM, NCR, Digital, Compaq, Zenith, Apple, Hewlett Packard - you name it! Most probably we have not up to now felt the challenges and seen the opportunities open to us because we have thought of ourselves as "book people". It would be helpful to think of the library not as a store of books and pe-

riodicals but as a system for information provision. This puts the emphasis on the information and knowledge, rather than on the forms in which they occur.

The terms “**library**” and “**librarians**” are themselves often considered by high technology people as out of place in the new information age and a little anachronistic. Perhaps this is why many high-technology, information oriented companies have renamed their corporate libraries. For example, IBM now has the “Technical Information Retrieval Centre”, Exxon has the “Research and Engineering Information Service” and Xerox has the “Technical Information Centre”.

It is essential that librarians become involved in the information age. We need first of all to re-educate ourselves and adopt a marketing approach to our services. This can be helped by investigating user needs and designing services around those needs, rather than just building up collections according to assumed requirements. We must create awareness and interest both to attract non-users and to educate current users in library use and our widening role as librarians.

THE GHANA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

What all these mean for the Ghana Library Association is a re-direction of efforts to help both libraries and librarians to give of their best. Our primary concern must be in the area of education of our members. Formal training takes place in our library school. We must augment it with informal training - semi-

nars, workshops, talks, demonstrations etc. These should form a major part of our activities. If we librarians are to measure up to our calling and challenges confronting us, our professional knowledge must be solid; both qualitatively and quantitatively. We must educate ourselves well enough to be able to educate our clientele.

The tasks facing the Ghana Library Association are not in themselves unique, because they represent the issues facing small professional associations in developing countries. What is worrying is that these same issues have plagued us for too long and we have done very little to correct them. They can be summarized as follows:

1. the improvement of our professional image in the country
2. the provision of training opportunities at all levels for our members
3. the realization and acceptance by us and others of the broadening role of the professional librarian
4. the adoption and implementation of new library services to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and the elimination of duplicative efforts.

As librarians, we are faced with a major challenge in proving the need for continued sustenance of our libraries and ourselves. We are also confronted with a major opportunity to explore new dimensions of services. The way we respond to the challenge and make use of the opportunities open to us will be a determining factor of our future success.