

# REMOVING BARRIERS TO LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA\*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson, Members of Council of the Ghana Library Association, Colleagues and Invited Guests, I wish first of all to express my appreciation for the invitation to deliver the main paper for this year's Congress. It is a great honour to me.

The topic, - "Removing Barriers to Library Development in Ghana," presupposes that there are some barriers to library development in the country. And indeed, there are barriers. Fortunately for me, some of the barriers are in the sub-themes for this Congress. This makes my work easier, because specialists in these areas are going to dilate on these issues. All the same, I shall touch on a few of the barriers that have not been highlighted in the sub-themes and then attempt to provide ways of removing the barriers.

## BARRIERS

One of the barriers to library development in Ghana is the apparent lack of recognition by the institutional and governmental authorities of the importance of library and information services. All other problems stem from this. "Until we realise this and are prepared to

devote some energy, attention and money to developing our library and information resources, we will forever be in a state of trying to catch up with the rest of the world"<sup>1</sup> and all our efforts to provide qualitative, functional education and achieve some scientific and technological stature in the society of nations will be illusory.

The state of the book industry in Ghana is also a major barrier to library development. The chronic balance of payments problems and the resulting scarcity of foreign exchange have not only substantially curtailed the flow of new books from local presses, but has also meant that the number of books imported into the country has dropped sharply. This has led to sharp increases in the prices of books in the country. The shortage of books means that neither the libraries nor the educational institutions are able to adequately provide for the needs of the reading public. A generation of students are now being taught by lecturers who are unable to gain access to current research and scholarship, or to keep up developments in their field.

Then also is the "over flogged" issue of a National Library. The lack of a physical

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structure like a National Library in the country is another barrier. When one considers the advantages to be obtained from the services of a National Library, then one notices the loss to the country for not having one. As Dr Kwame Nkrumah of blessed memory once noted, "a good national library is at once the repository of the nation's culture and wisdom and an intellectual stimulant."<sup>2</sup>

A National Library will be a centre for library cooperation. It will also be responsible for compiling and publishing the national bibliography, union catalogues, and union list of serials. It will also help in improving upon the poor bibliographic services as provided in the country at present.

### **REMOVING THE BARRIERS**

As stated, I have touched on just a few of the barriers because most of them such as funding; image of the profession; networking; and human resource development are treated as sub-themes for this Congress. In this section, an attempt shall be made at suggesting ways in which these barriers can be removed.

It is rather ironical and interesting to note that one of the ways of removing the barriers to library development in Ghana is among us present here - the Library Association. In many developing countries, the history of the Library Association is in fact the history of library development in the country. Where the Library Association is very active, it follows that library development increases.

In the view of Ferguson,<sup>3</sup> governments in developing countries by themselves, even with the best of intentions, will not concentrate re-

sources on library and information services unless there is strong pressure to do so. Hence the need for the Ghana Library Association (GLA) to create awareness among Ghanaians who can in turn put pressure on the government. Although it is clear that the GLA has been making efforts to draw the attention of the government to various lapses in the provision of library and information services in the country, a lot more needs to be done.

The problem of poor funding of library services will be with us for a long while. So long as we continue to depend solely on government funding, we shall continue to be dissatisfied with our budgetary allocations. A way out of this is to find alternative sources of funding our libraries. It is interesting to note that even in advanced countries such as U S A and Britain where libraries and information centres are better funded, they still look out for alternative funding.

At present, funding for libraries in Ghana has become tight, while the cost of information materials increases. Libraries are therefore having a hard time justifying their existence. Therefore, as a first step, it is proposed that all the major libraries in the country set up public relations units to be controlled by professional librarians. These units will have the major role of attracting donors (both internal and external) to the library.<sup>4</sup>

Another way of removing barriers in library development in Ghana is the need to market our services. Many library professionals wonder why most libraries face an uphill task to prosper and survive. Why, as departments of larger organisations, are libraries not at-

tractive investment ventures for financiers and policy makers? Why do some users think that the services being offered in libraries are not worth the money invested in them? The answers to all these whys lie in the fact that, as library professionals, we have done very little to market our services. We have not given users exactly the kind of service they need. We assume that users' needs are satisfied because they come to use the library. This kind of attitude has not encouraged us at all to see the need to market ourselves and our services.<sup>5</sup>

The best remedy for this weakness is to inject marketing concepts and strategies vigorously into library service. Libraries have not been imbued with a high public profile. Librarians are in the habit of attending conferences and seminars with little or no application of the benefits. As the late Prof. Havard-Williams<sup>6</sup> once observed, librarians are fond of talking to one another instead of educating non-librarians about their profession. A few librarians are capable of educating their superiors about the value of libraries in development, and even about the basic facts of what qualified librarians do. How do we expect such people to create a good impression on donor agencies and countries?

There is also the very important issue of a National Information Policy. Sengupta defines a National Information Policy as "a set of decisions taken by a government through appropriate laws and regulations to orient the harmonious development of information activities in order to satisfy the information needs of a country."<sup>7</sup>

In effect, it is a declaration of intent by the

Government through parliament and it is concerned and deals with the development and management of all organisations dealing with information - libraries, archives, documentation centres, broadcasting telecommunications, media, publishing houses etc. Its main objective is to provide support to enable these organisations to fulfil the information requirements of the country and also provide optimum utilisation of information.

By implication, it would also deal with the imbalance with regard to information generation, storage and distribution between rural and urban areas and between a country and other countries. It is also concerned with identifying the needs of the country as prerequisite for developing a National Information Policy.

This thus ensures that a nation's information resources are used with maximum economy and effectiveness; prevents waste; duplication and needless expenses. It also provides networking arrangements within countries and among countries by identifying, locating and obtaining information for users. This would go a long way to enhance library development in Ghana.

Unfortunately for us in Ghana, it appears the government's conception is narrowly restricted to the "soft" or "mass media" generated information, often in disregard of "hard" or library and bibliographical information, upon which the development of modern science and technology depends. Two examples from recent memory will suffice to explain this. About six years ago, a National Conference on Information Policy excluded members of the library profession. The main

emphasis on the conference was telecommunications and broadcasting, ignoring other elements of information such as library services. Protests and appeals from members of the GLA fell on deaf ears. In a similar situation, but for the singular effort of a determined librarian who happened to be a member of the Consultative Assembly, the GLA would have been denied a place on the National Media Commission.<sup>8</sup>

Another barrier to library development in the country is the lack of inter-library cooperation. In times of poor funding and lack of resources as we have at the moment, one would have expected more resource-sharing among libraries in the country. Interestingly, it appears that libraries in the country find it easier to request materials from overseas than from sister libraries in the country. A way out of this is for libraries in Ghana to properly develop local bibliographic and union catalogues. Presently, it is much easier for libraries in Ghana to know what is available in libraries overseas than in local libraries. This should not be the case.

The country's legal deposit law also poses a barrier to library development. This comes in three ways. Firstly, although this law should have provided our libraries with a substantial amount of materials, it has not been so because publishers do not consider the penalty as any deterrent enough to flout it. Secondly, the law excludes the University for Development Studies which should have been a major depository. Thirdly and most importantly, the law does not make provision for the collection of grey literature.

Considering the fact that this country has

hosted numerous national and international conferences and seminars during the past decade, coupled with the large number of research and consultancy reports, then this law has to be re-examined for the necessary changes to be made in favour of library development.

An important issue for discussion is appropriate education for library and information science in Ghana. The task of formulating a strategy for library and information science education is even more complex. There is for example the problem with the future of undergraduate diplomates in the country. I am already aware of the controversy surrounding the introduction of a Bachelors Degree in Librarianship.

One of the problems of tertiary education in Ghana is that we do not often consider our national needs when taking certain decisions. For example in the U.K., diplomates who do well can take a Bachelor's degree after one year and then go on to a Master's degree. Yet this would be considered a taboo to mention in Ghana. I have a feeling that if such Masters holders are not going to the university to teach, they would provide a good core of experience for our libraries. There should be some flexibility in the educational system so as to allow entry at different points and levels. This will go a long way to increase the number of professional librarians in the country. After all, we are in a democracy and in democracies, numbers count.

The image of the profession is also a sub-theme for this Congress. There will therefore be an in-depth treatment of this issue later. It is however pertinent to mention that

this is a major barrier to library development not only in Ghana, but world-wide.<sup>9</sup> One reason for this is that the Ghanaian society in which the librarian operates is one built on a socio-economic system that hardly appreciates the cultural and commercial importance of information and the role of the information professional who handles its processing and dissemination.

One way of removing this barrier is for us librarians to assert ourselves in whichever environment we find ourselves. The days of librarians always "hiding" behind books are over. We must be seen and be heard. As a result of our "docile" attitude, a good number of library users find it difficult, mostly out of ignorance, to differentiate between a library attendant, a library assistant, and a professionally trained librarian. To the average library user, they are all "librarians." I believe even the university community in Ghana needs to be enlightened about the nature of the profession and about all the services the librarian can provide.

Related to the problem of image is that of status of librarians in the country. This has also become a barrier to library development especially in academic and special libraries where in some cases, the librarian is not considered equal to other professionals with similar qualifications and expertise. This barrier can be removed through the collective efforts of librarians to serve their clients as effectively as possible. As stated by Ranganathan, "the status of anybody is taken and not given by somebody else. So it is with library personnel."<sup>10</sup>

Librarians will earn respect within their in-

stitutions, organisations, the society and the country at large if they are able to deliver their goods properly, possess an understanding of the client's needs, and are capable of giving correct and quick information services to the users.

We need to develop our own various performance indicators which will help raise the standards of performance of information and library services. The truth is that good service brings more resources. If we wait for resources before giving the services, often we will wait for ever, and our place will be taken by some more innovative service. (e.g. out-sourcing).

### CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this paper to discuss some of the barriers to library development in Ghana and ways of removing these barriers. But I also have to mention that although as librarians, we have the ability to develop libraries, we do not necessarily have power over the ultimate existence of libraries. That power lies in the society that created the libraries. It is the society that can determine whether to develop the libraries or to destroy them.

A concerted effort is therefore required from librarians, policy-makers and information users in order to remove these barriers if libraries are to serve any meaningful purpose in the country. Each of these groups must understand the role that they have to play and ensure that they make an effective contribution towards the removal of these barriers. Until this is done, the barriers will remain there, and libraries in Ghana will not be able to contribute to the economic, social and political development of the country.

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