

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF RESOURCE SHARING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Cephas Odini

Faculty of Information Sciences

Moi University

Eldoret, Kenya.

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the fundamental obstacles to resource sharing in developing countries which include the inadequacy of existing resources, the lack of information about them and the unco-operative attitudes and policies. The paper highlights the various planning and administrative factors which developing countries need to consider when designing their library resource sharing programmes. The paper finally concludes that resource sharing programmes based on computerised networks are not often technically feasible in developing countries and suggests that the skills of librarians, more than anything else, will determine the success of such in developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

Rydings (1977) defines library resource sharing as the process whereby the resources of a group or network of libraries is made available to the sum total of the persons entitled to use any one of those libraries. Resource sharing is a wide phrase embracing library co-operation, library systems, and networking. It is an omnibus expression to cover co-operation, co-ordination, interlibrary loans, co-operative acquisition, co-operative storage and processing. Resource sharing may appear to be nothing more than a new term for the familiar concept of library co-operation. True, many of the same activities are included, but there is a significant difference in the approach. The earlier term takes the existence of libraries for granted and describes how they can achieve their objectives better by working together. The new term appears rather to assume a range of physical, intellectual and conceptual resources on the one hand and a body of people with library and information needs on the other, and covers the activities involved in organising the one into a set of optimum relationships to meet the needs of the other. Resource sharing may be seen as a term for working out inter-institutional relationships for the benefit of users in a profession which is frequently described as changing from materials-orientation to client-orientation.

The basic function of the library is to match the information needs of users with information contents of documents. The proper performance of this function requires the services of library staff and the provision of library facilities in the accommoda-

tion and equipment. These in turn need the support of an infrastructure comprising administrative authority — sometimes in the form of legislation — an organisation structure and adequate finance. All these elements — finance, organisation, authority, accommodation, equipment, manpower and collections of documents — may be regarded as library resources, and thus, as the legitimate subjects of resource sharing programmes.

Information is essential for national development. But the exponential growth of information in recent years has surpassed the ability of individuals and institutions to cope with it. How to tap this wealth of information in a systematic way so that it can be applied to increase knowledge, guide research and formulate policy has become one of the most pressing problems of the 1980's.

For centuries, librarians have pursued the unattainable goal of gathering, in a single library, all the resources necessary for information and research in their country or institution. Once a fond hope, this has become an impossible dream. If libraries are to continue to meet the demands of their users, increased co-operation and resource-sharing are vital. While resource sharing programmes in the developed world have been successful, there are many fundamental obstacles to attaining the objectives of resource sharing programmes in the developing countries, and yet the benefits of resource sharing programmes are tremendous. They include avoidance of unnecessary duplication, possibility of access to a wider range of materials, collections and services, and the satisfaction of national and community objectives.

CONSTRAINTS OF RESOURCE SHARING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

There is no doubt that resource sharing programmes have a significant role to play in developing countries, given the problems of scarce resources in the developing countries especially with regards to human, material and financial aspects. Some of the most significant constraints are identified below:

First is the lack of a firm national policy on libraries, thus information services are seldomly rated among many priorities. As a result, library budgets are correspondingly low, thus making it impossible for libraries to provide optimum sources.

Secondly most developing countries, according to Parker (1977) lack the data on present library situation, and this constitutes a serious obstacle to effective planning whether of library development in general or of resource sharing programmes in particular. The lack of data on the present library situation is one of the main obstacles to effective planning. Many countries do not know how many libraries they have, or where they are, or their locations, how many workers are employed in the libraries, at what levels; what their collections contain, or what use is made of them; how many library users or potential users exist and what their needs are. Such data can only be collected with the willing co-operation of librarians in all kinds of library and in all parts of the country. Resource-sharing, at least of manpower, is thus not merely a desirable, but an essential element in the data collection process on which successful planning depends.

Thirdly, the rapid escalation in the price of materials, particularly periodicals, also means that the already meagre library budgets lose purchasing power from year to year. In addition, exchange control regulations in many countries make the purchase of foreign materials very difficult. The physical collection of documents is hindered by lack of an efficient book trade and by gaps and delays in reporting new publications in national bibliographies, where these exist.

Another constraint is the lack of facilities for rapid communication among national libraries and documentation centres, inefficient equipment for producing photocopies and microforms, poor telephone and postal services and restrictive customs regulations also hamper access and exchange of information.

A fifth constraint is poor transport and communication facilities in most geographical locations in developing countries.

PROSPECTS OF RESOURCES SHARING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Resource sharing cannot be possible when resources are as limited as to be only adequate for the immediate use of local clients, as this is the most common characteristics of libraries, archives and information centres in developing countries. The success of any resource sharing venture depends not only on having appropriate goals and objectives, but also on creating and operating a service within the right legal, administrative and fiscal framework. Indeed, regard must also be paid to the political background in the case of any resource sharing scheme which includes a number of countries in a region. Even within a single country, resource sharing has political implications, since information is a national asset and library or information network is a public utility.

In countries with a federal type of government, additional political and legal considerations arise, since because of its very nature, library resource sharing cannot be confined to any one state or province. The means of establishing appropriate levels of government control or involvement in a country with a federal government, may include the use of state agencies for distributing federal funds and a federal interstate compact for schemes involving more than one state. Whatever the constitution of a country, statutory bodies such as a national council or commission, or parastatal institutions, such as a national library, should have a key role as instruments for implementing government policy in developing countries. Specific legal considerations may include: the law relating to the free flow of information, legal deposit, access to government documents, patent information, the checking and safeguarding of data in machine readable form, the translation and reproduction of books published abroad, and the control and use of telecommunications networks, if they exist.

One legal matter which is of special significance for resource sharing relates to copyright. The concept of "fair dealing" in making copies of articles in periodicals or extracts from monographs has proved adequate for several decades, holding in balance the interests of authors and publishers on the one hand and on the other,

users of information and libraries acting on their behalf. In some countries, legislation may be needed to take personal responsibility from the librarian if books lent either to individuals or to institutions are lost. Such enactments need replacing by administrative measures designed to ensure a proper control of library materials, such as is consistent with the provision of reasonable access to them.

Developing countries which set up national bodies of the type described will be in good position to identify the needs for basic local and institutional services, for supplementary centralised services and for other resource sharing arrangements. These bodies will of course require their own input of data on which to base their decisions and their own channels for receiving specialist advice. As they will normally report to a central organ of government, they will have the official plan and the broad range of data on which these plans were based. When the national planning and co-ordinating body takes up its responsibilities in a developing country, it is likely that some limited progress in resource sharing will be achieved. There is the need therefore to have a national body for the planning for resource sharing, with a view to planning favourable conditions for such, developing a professional ethic which will provide an influential pressure group that will establish an effective information network including library, information and archive services, and appropriate educational and training agencies. This will be in line with the Unesco recommendation that there should be establishment of representative national bodies of appropriate status.

While resource sharing programmes in developing countries are desirable, they should not be rushed into without good planning. Thus, the points listed below should be taken into account before embarking on resource sharing programmes that will aid the provision of optimum service among the co-operating libraries.

1. Clarify objectives in advance. Co-operating libraries should try to assess potential demands for library services by studying the nature and extent of users' needs;
2. Recognise that resource sharing requires money, staff and commitment to the common purpose;
3. Devise programmes from which all participants, including large libraries will benefit;
4. Assume that there is no one best approach. Consider various forms of co-operation and devise programmes that can be carried out with resources available;
5. Be familiar with approaches tried elsewhere, but not to assume that they can be transplanted. While some can be accepted with modification, others should be rejected in favour of better ones that are more suitable to local conditions;
6. Recognise and make allowances for problems that will arise from limitations of infrastructure, e.g. postal and telephone service, photocopying, equipment maintenance etc;
7. Consider the possibilities of multi-country programmes where there are solidly based national systems on which to build; and

8. Be sceptical about elaborate computerised systems as the only sound approach, but at the same time, willing to experiment with computerised networks where conditions seem favourable.

CONCLUSION

The development and exploitation of technology offer the hope that networks for knowledge will one day bring the resources of the greatest libraries within the reach of users of the smallest collection in developing countries. Machinery alone will not do the magic. The skill, determination and patience of librarians will be required in the future, as they are today, if the maximum potentials of library resource sharing are to be realised.

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*Cephas Odini is a lecturer in the Faculty of Information Sciences, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. He attended the Universities of Nairobi, Wales and Sheffield. He holds B.Ed. and M.A. Librarianship.