THE ROLE OF NATIONAL ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE ESARBICA REGION IN FOSTERING COLLABORATION AND BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Patrick Ngulube
Information Studies Programme, School of Sociology and Social Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
Email: ngulubep@ukzn.ac.za
and
Rosemary Sibanda
Department of Library and Information Science, National University of Science and Technology, Zimbabwe
Email: rsibanda@nust.ac.zw

It is probably not love that makes the world go round, but rather those mutually supportive alliances through which partners recognize their dependence on each other for the achievement of shared and private goals. Fred Allen (American comedian 1894-1956)

Abstract

This article explores the role that national archival institutions in the East and Southern Africa Regional of Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) region play in fostering collaboration and building partnerships in the information society. Secondly, it aims at stimulating debate around partnerships and their application in the archival sector. Partnerships have been traditionally confined to the mainstream public and private sectors, and their expansion into the heritage sector including arts, museums, libraries and archives seems to be a recent development (Wilson & Boyle 2004). Although, the International Council on Archives (to which ESARBICA is affiliated) is committed to the advancement of archives through international collaboration, there has been very limited discussion on partnerships in the archival sector in general, and particularly in Africa. Partnerships are fundamental to service delivery in the information society and safeguarding society's collective memory.

Keywords: Archival Institutions, Collaboration, ESARBICA, Millennium Goals, Partnerships

Introduction

Partnerships have been traditionally confined to the mainstream public and private sectors, and their expansion into the heritage sector including arts, museums, libraries and archives seems to be a recent development (Wilson & Boyle 2004:513). Although, the International Council on Archives (to which ESARBICA is affiliated) is committed to the advancement of archives through international collaboration, there has been very limited discussion on partnerships in the archival sector in general, and particularly in Africa. Partnerships are fundamental to service delivery in the information society and safeguarding society's memory.

The need to collaborate and develop partnerships is underscored by the globalization of information which in turn has led to the emergency of an information society. The ideals of the information society would remain a pipe dream if information produced by governments is not managed through its life cycle and made accessible when it is needed. Why all this fuss about public records and archives? The answer to this question is very simple. As far as documentary materials are concerned, governments are the biggest collectors, providers and disseminators in any country (Ngulube 2001; 2003:24). Public archives and records are the cornerstones of government's ability to provide basic services to citizens. Furthermore, they belong to the public, so they must be accessible as evidence for decisions and actions for which governments are accountable to citizens. According to Guercio (2001:244):

> The principal role of the record is, in fact, that of rendering the act or fact, which is the subject of the record in its original administrative context, accessible and knowable across time and space.

There can be no information society without accessible recorded information. National archival institutions as the centralising agencies for official records in their countries are key players in the information society as they facilitate the proper management of public records so that the information contained in them remains accessible. The level of access to and availability of information may influence the ability of the ESARBICA region to effectively participate in the information

society and the fulfillment of the United Nation's Millennium Goals. The Millennium Goals include:

> eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achievement of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and development of global partnerships for development for the attainment of a more peaceful, just and prosperous world cannot be realized without access to, and utilisation of information (World Summit on the Information Society 2003).

As encapsulated in the "Declaration of Principles Building the Information Society" by the World Summit on the Information Society (2003) and its "Plan of action", no single country or organization can ever successfully deal with the challenges of the information society. Managing public records and archives in the information economy require the concerted efforts of multiple stakeholders. It is extremely difficult for any one actor to deal with the challenges and opportunities that have been heralded by the information society.

It is in that light that this paper is concerned with fostering partnerships and collaboration in the ESARBICA region. The ethos of collaboration already exists in the region and the question is: How can it be further promoted for the benefit of the region. The structure of the paper involves a brief outline of the discourse on partnerships, objectives of ESARBICA, achievement and initiatives of ESARBICA in building partnerships. Conclusions are then considered.

Background and theoretical framework

There is no single definition of partnerships. According to Coles and Smith (1999:2), "…'partnership', 'alliances', 'networks' and 'collaboration' are often used to describe broadly similar processes in various contexts". Although, the term "partnerships" has been used differently in various contexts, for the purpose of this discussion partnerships involve "pooling or sharing of resources among two or more stakeholders to solve a problem or create an opportunity that neither can address individually" (Selin & Chavez 1995:844). It is noteworthy that Bardach (1998) and Moore (1996) defined collaboration as any joint activity by two or more organizations intended to create public value

by working together rather than separately. The similarity in the definition of the terms partnership and collaboration has prompted some scholars to use them interchangeably. Both definitions emphasize on coordinated cooperation. As partnerships, collaboration requires formal commitment among all partners to "a definition of mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards" (Mattesich & Monsey 1992: 7).

However, there is an ongoing debate as to whether or not partnerships are beneficial to all stakeholders involved in a collaborative relationship (Coulson 2005:151). The debate is premised on the grounds that partnerships are rarely forged between equals, and there are instances where partnerships have become an epitome of the relationship between a horse and the rider. On the other hand, there is a school of thought that views partnerships as an important vehicle for fostering "collaborative advantage" (Huxham 1996). In fact, the formation of networks, partnerships, collaborations and coalitions is fast becoming part of the strategic tool kit of many organisations throughout the whole world (Wagner, Mlcek & Spence 2004). Working together has numerous benefits. There are limitations as to what an organisation can achieve while working on its own in isolation. In fact, the power of individual autonomy cannot be sustained in a global information society.

The belief that more can be achieved through working together has prompted policy makers and funding bodies to embrace "partnerships" as a new strategy to increase the efficient use of resources, achieve cost effectiveness, attract external funding, deliver high quality services (raise standards), provide joint solutions to common problems, engage in joint research and training, and share information and expertise (Huxham 1996; Wagner, Mlcek & Spence 2004). The growth of partnerships, especially, in the private and public sectors is an international phenomenon (Osborne 2000:1; Wagner, Mlcek & Spence 2004).

In that light, the "powerful momentum for collaboration" as envisaged by Sullivan and Sckelcher (2000) "is unlikely to be diminished". However, partnerships are about people and they may develop or fail just

like relationships among humans. Partnerships viability may be influenced by "differences in aims, language, procedures, culture and perceived power" (Huxham 1996:4), and the "need to spend unusual amounts of time in reaching understanding and agreements compared to other situations, and worst becoming embroiled in misunderstanding and conflict" (Huxham 1996:5). Furthermore, partnerships may fail because of the following factors (Huxham & Vangen 2000; Kanter 1989):

- shifts in strategy by any of the partners;
- complexity and dynamics of partnership structure and purpose;
- absence of a common vision or working framework;
- uneven levels of commitment;
- imbalances in power; and
- conflicting loyalties.

In that regard,

> The most effective partnerships are dynamic and interactive, work toward common goals, and are characterized by a high level of commitment among group members (Jenkins 2001:6).

One of the critical elements in establishing partnerships is sustainability. Sustainable partnerships (Alexander, et al 2003) depend on:

- outcomes-based advocacy;
- vision-focus balance;
- systems orientation;
- infrastructure development; and
- community linkages.

The East and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) may use the framework suggested by Alexander, et al (2003), largely developed in the context of community health, to further map out partnerships that may help the region to deal with the challenges it is facing. Key challenges identified from the literature include (International Council on Archives 2003:4):

- limited capacity in relation to electronic records management and preservation;
- lack of skills and knowledge to deal with new formats;
- dated and incomprehensive legal frameworks for archives and recordkeeping;

- limited advocacy and promotion of archives;
- paucity of the development and use of archival standards and best practices;
- limited research into the management of records irrespective of format;
- dwindling financial resources;
- inadequate strategies for preserving and protecting records;
- limited utilisation of information and communication technologies;
- accumulation of backlogs of unprocessed records; and
- neglect of the oral memory and indigenous archive.

Taken together, the challenges provide an opportunity for the ESARBICA region to build partnerships with governments, regional development agencies, educational institutions, regional and international donor agencies, and promote the value of collaboration. How many national archival institutions have active partnerships with educational institutions in their respective countries? How many of institutions are engaging with the (Southern African Development Community (SADC), (in the case of southern African states), structures or the African Union (AU) or New Partnership for Development (NEPAD)? How many archival institutions are visible in bilateral and multilateral agreements in their respective countries? How many institutions have formal exchange programmes with countries with more developed archival structures? How many institutions work with library and information institutions in their countries? How many archival institutions have embraced the Millennium Goals? The list of questions that beg for answers is very long. However, some of the answers to this endless list of questions are articulated in the objectives of ESARBICA and various declarations and resolutions that ESARBICA has made in various conferences.

Partnerships in the ESARBICA region

The essence of working together collaboratively is a theme that runs through all the objectives of ESARBICA and its strategic plans. Basically, some of the objectives of ESARBICA are to:

- provide a forum for the exchange of professional ideals and expertise in the administration and preservation of archives and records;
- promote, organise and co-ordinate activities in the management of records and archives at both regional and international levels;
- establish, maintain and strengthen relations between archivists in the ESARBICA region and other professionals and institutions concerned with the administration and preservation of records and archives;
- carry out the aims and objectives of the International Council on Archives;
- facilitate continuing education through professional attachments, study visits, seminars and workshops;
- provide technical and financial assistance to members whenever possible; and
- promote the implementation of the professional code of conduct (code of ethics).

These above objectives are akin to what Huxham and Vangen (1996:9) referred to as meta-goals for collaborating, that is, a statement of what it is aiming to achieve. Key to the fulfilment of these goals would be the development of a formal strategy or mission. As pointed out by Wilson and Boyle (2004:521) a strategy would:

- articulate the shared vision and purpose of the organisation; and
- define the nature and extent of the activities and the roles of the partners within an agreed time frame.

It is encouraging to learn that ESARBICA has been involved in the process of developing a formal mission or strategy for the region. Although there have been short term and medium term plans and strategies to deal with specific problems, it is our contention that a long term formal strategy should have been developed from the early stages of the partnership, that is, at the inception of ESARBICA in 1969. What we should be doing is reviewing and fine tuning it rather than sitting on the drawing board developing a new one.

However, the short term and medium term plans have enabled ESARBICA to work collaboratively in some of the following fields:

- Motivating for the adoption of the joint ministerial 'Declaration on Archives in Africa'[1];
- Founding Fathers Exhibition (an exhibition of photographs of the key figures in the struggle for freedom in various countries);
- Sponsoring biennial conferences and workshops;
- Capacity building in records and archives management;
- Jointly sponsoring meetings, seminars, workshops, and other professional development activities;
- Convening executive boards, teams or steering committees meetings;
- Maintaining ongoing, informal relationships with members of;
- Publishing journals and newsletters;
- Sponsoring and coordinating information-sharing and problem-solving meetings and work sessions;
- Representing the region in regional and international fora with one voice;
- Lobbying governments to support archival activities (for example the Cape Town Declaration);
- Coordinating projects in the region;
- Working with other organisations' agenda (for example, Aluka[2]); and
- Promoting and popularizing the region's archival heritage through joint programmes and special events.

Partnerships and linkages between ESARBICA and the global village

ESARBICA as part of the global collaborate directly or indirectly works with international organisations such as the International Council on Archives, the International Records Management Trust, the World Bank, United Nations Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and other developmental organisations in supporting and improving the management of public records and archives, as a component of promoting good governance in Africa. ESARBICA is perhaps the only regional organisation concerned with the management of records and archives that is strategically position in relation to developing sustainable partnerships with the global village. However, ESARBICA has to answer a lot of strategic questions if it is going to successfully fulfil this critical role.

The questions that we should be trying to get answers to are: how do we ensure as ESARBICA that workable regional solutions are found to global issues in general and to southern and eastern Africa region in particular? How do we reposition ESARBICA in order to take advantage of opportunities that exist for the records management in the international fora? What opportunities of partnership exist in accessing technology, that is, information and communication technology networks, services and equipment, standard approaches and best practices? A case in point would be the challenges and opportunities posed by e-readiness initiatives in southern and eastern Africa right now. There is, for instance the proposed NEPAD e-Readiness Project. Should we as ESARBICA not be building the electronic records management capacity from partnerships with stakeholders in the project? Basically, the project aims to extend the recently completed SADC e-readiness initiative to encompass all other African countries. This project is intended to determine the readiness of individual African countries to benefit from Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) applications and services.

There is also the East Coast Broadband fibre optic cable access whereby the submarine fibre optic cable already connects African countries on the west coast from Senegal to South Africa. On the other hand, the African countries on the Mediterranean coast and the Red Sea down to Djibouti are already connected to the existing international submarine cables. There also exists the possibility of connecting countries and islands along the east coast of Africa and the landlocked countries to the west coast and the east coast to a new cable linking South Africa to Djibouti. Is it not possible of ESARBICA to use such opportunities as hooks for their electronic capacity building initiatives? The opportunity to use such partnerships exists. Indeed, the Declaration on Archives in Africa made in Cape Town on 21 October 2003 recommended that " the ESARBICA Executive Board and the technical specialists of the five pillar NEPAD countries (Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa) should develop a programme of action to be put to the NEPAD and AU structures for approval and for listing for the donor funding support".

Although ESARBICA has a long history of partnership among archival institutions in the region, the relationship needs to be improved.

Some of the region's archival institutions have competitive advantages over others due to various levels of economic development and existing infrastructure. Such countries as South Africa and Botswana, for instance, have a comparative advantage in infrastructure relative to other east and southern African countries. Given the disparity in archival development in the region, ESARBICA should promote the development of "centres of excellence" in the development of strategies for the whole region and benefit from that regionally. Surely, some archival collections or systems may be regarded as centres of excellence in the region. Such institution can play a critical role in leading the region in their respective areas of excellency for the mutual benefit of the region. The use of centres of excellence may promote the sharing of information and expertise on managing records and archives in the region as well as the management of all the knowledge that exists in the region on records and archives management that is seemingly underutilised. An up-to-date database of experts would be key to managing all the knowledge asserts in the region.

The establishing of the Africa Agenda in relation to partnerships requires pro-activeness on the part of ESARBICA when it comes to dealing with donor funding. ESARBICA should carry out an audit of its needs (needs assessment) and draw up proposals that reflect their priorities. ESARBICA should then submit the proposal in the spirit of the philosophy of a bottom up approach which tend to be aligned to the needs of the people initiating their projects. There are projects such as Aluka which although well intend do not always promote the Africa Agenda. Africa is a developing continent and should obviously take advantage of all funding opportunities, but that should not be at the detriment of a set agenda. All funding should be aligned to an agreed upon Africa Agenda if they are going to lead to the sustainable development of archival activities. ESARBICA can justifiably claim ownership of such project.

Conclusions

Although more empirical evidence is required to come up with viable conclusions on the benefits of working in "partnerships" in the African context we can make some few conclusions that may form the basis for further research. An empirical study would provide a useful

balance for understanding partnerships and network practices in the archival sector in Africa. While partnerships hold significant promise for developing collaborative advantage, they are not a panacea. Although, partnerships are rarely of equals as pointed out by Benson (1975), they should benefit all parties involved, and the stakeholders should work together in a complimentary manner irrespective of their strengths and loyalties. Some other critical elements in establishing effective partnerships include formulating a clear mission and shared responsibility by all stakeholders.

ESARBICA has been a viable partnership and has set an example for other regional archival organisation, but the problematic area seems to be implementation. A cursory review of the declarations and resolutions depict an organisation that is committed to collaboration and partnerships. The question is to what extent have the noble intentions of the resolutions have been implemented? What formal mechanisms are in place to effectively monitor and evaluate progress achieved thus far against the resolution of the past seventeen conferences?

References

Alexander, J. A., Weiner, B. J., Metzger, M. E., Shortell, S. M., Bazzoli, G. J., Hasnain-Wynia, R., Sofaer, S. & Conrad, D. A. 2003. Sustainability of collaborative capacity in community health partnerships. *Medical Care Research and Review* 60 (4): 130-160.

Bardach, E. 2001. Developmental dynamics: collaboration as an emergent phenomenon. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 11(2): 149 – 164.

Benson, J. K. 1975. The organisational network as a political economy. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 20: 229-249.

Coles, J & Smith, D. 1999. Universities and regional partnerships for learning: reinterpreting the 'local' in the education of adults. Paper read at SCUTREA 29th Annual Conference, University of Warwick, 5-7 July 1999. Available: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000982.doc. (Accessed 10 May 2005).

Coulson, A. 2005. A plague of all your partnerships: theory and practice regeneration. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 18(2): 151-163.

Huxham, C. 1996. Collaboration and collaborative advantage. Huxham, C. (ed.) *Creating collaborative advantage*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, pp. 1-18.

Huxham, C. & Vangen, S. 2000. What makes partnerships work? In Osborne, S. P. (ed.) 2000. *Public-private partnerships: theory and practice in international perspective*. London: Routledge, pp. 293-310.

Huxham, C. & Vangen, S. 1996. Working together: key themes in the management of relationships between public and non-profit organisations. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 9(7): 5-17.

International Council on Archives. 2003. What do ICA members want? *Flash* 2: 4-5.

Jenkins, D. 2001. Characteristics of enduring partnerships. *Proceedings of Mid-Western Educational Research, Association*, Chicago, IL, 24-27 October.

Kanter, R. M. 1989. *When giants learn to dance*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Mattesich, P. W., & Monsey, B. R. 1992. *Collaboration: What makes it work? A review of research literature on factors influencing*

successful collaboration. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Moore, M. H. 1996. *Creating public value: strategic management in government*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ngulube, P. 2001. Strategies for managing digital records and documents in the public sector in Sub Saharan Africa. Paper red at the 67th IFLA Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, August 16-25, 2001. Available at: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla67/papers/110-172e.pdf. (Accessed 10 July 2005).

Ngulube, P. 2003. Preservation and access to public records and archives in South Africa. PhD thesis. University of Natal: Pietermaritzburg. Available at: http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/infs/thesispn.pdf. (Accessed 25 February 2005).

Osborne, S. P. (ed.) 2000. *Public-private partnerships: theory and practice in international perspective*. London: Routledge.

Selin, S. & Chavez, D. 1995. Developing an evolutionary tourism partnership model. *Annals of Tourism Research* 22(4): 844-856.

Sullivan, H. & Skelcher, C. 2000. *Working across partnerships: collaboration in public services*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wagner, R., Mlcek, S. & Spence, N. 2004. Partnerships and collaborations as paucity management practice in Australian community based human service organisations. Paper read at the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) Sixth International Conference on Contesting Citizenship and Civil Society in a Divided World held in Toronto, Canada, July 11-14, 2004. Available: http://atlas-conferences.com/c/a/l/l/17.htm. (Accessed 15 May 2005).

Wilson, L-A. & Boyle, E. 2004. The role of partnerships in the delivery of local government museum services: a case study from Northern Ireland. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 17(6): 513-533.

World Summit on the Information Society. 2003. Plan of action. http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html. (Accessed 15 May 2005).

World Summit on the Information Society. 2003. Declaration of Principles Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium. http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html. (Accessed 15 May 2005).

Endnotes

1. The recommendations of the Ministerial Declaration included: preservation of ancient manuscripts, archives of the liberation struggles, electronic records management, oral history/memory, conservation training and networking between all African regions.

2. Aluka is Ithaka's project aimed at building and sustaining an online digital library of scholarly resources from and about the developing world, beginning in Africa. The current focus of the project is to make liberation struggle documents more accessible irrespective of their location. It is going to contribute to capacity building through training, and technology and skills transfer (but to mention a few).