

**ESTABLISHING AND MANAGING DEVELOPMENT NETWORKS IN  
AFRICA: PERSPECTIVES ON THE AFRICAN VIRTUAL LIBRARY  
AND INFORMATION NETWORK (AVLIN)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In times like this when libraries are facing problems with access and acquisition of materials, networking becomes very important. This paper discusses issues relating to networking in libraries with particular reference to the African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN). The paper focuses on the goals and objectives of AVLIN; achievements and potential barriers; and the way forward for AVLIN. The paper also stresses the need for the sustenance of AVLIN in order to alleviate the problems of information provision in Africa.*

**KEYWORDS:** INFORMATION NETWORKS, DEVELOPMENT NETWORKS, MANAGEMENT, VIRTUAL LIBRARY

**Introduction**

Networking, whether local, metropolitan, national or regional, is becoming increasingly common among libraries and other information-provision organizations. Networking enables libraries to become integral parts of the organization-wide communication infrastructure. Any part of the organization that remains outside of this infrastructure may be largely excluded from the formal and informal decision-making systems of the

organization. The inability to access national and international networks will certainly complicate the issue of equality of access to information.

UNESCO (1991) defines information networking as “a set of interrelated information systems associated with communication facilities, which are operating through more or less formal agreements and institutional arrangements, in order to jointly implement information handling operation, with a view to pooling their resources and to offer better services to users”. The main purpose of networks is to facilitate access and utilization of data and information resources of participating institutions.

Furthermore, networks provide access to other databases within and outside a country, which are used for interactive or on-line searching. In the library world, the present focus of networking is on on-line networks, linking member libraries to computer resources by means of telecommunication connections. Networking therefore has the capacity of improving the performance of individuals as well as that of the corporate entity.

### **Forms of Networks**

Various forms of networks may be found in the provision of information. Some of these are electronic networks such as local area networks and inter-library networks. These can offer a variety of benefits to the library. They are however, influenced by the size of the library, its budget, the size of its staff and the range of automation experience that the library staff already has.

There is also the non-electronic networks which may range from simple Interlibrary Lending and Document Delivery (ILLDD), to a more established Consortium, made up of a group of libraries with a common aim of information provision. While it is true that the non-electronic networks may also depend on the resources and budget of the library, it appears that this depends more on the commitment and interests of the librarians themselves.

In all these forms of networks, a decision could be taken whether to make it formal or informal. In the case of informal networks, there are no prepared agreements or contracts. Each library provides resources to, and receives resources from other libraries on an informal basis. With the formal networks such as Consortia, contractual agreements are signed, administrators are appointed or elected, and meetings are held to take common decisions.

### **Hierarchy of Networks**

A network may begin with a person-to-person arrangement or a list-serve of addresses of a group of people with common interests. This could also be a discussion group. Networks could also take the form of the Invisible College Network where scholars interact through mails to share ideas or to collaborate in research. This network could be across oceans and across subject disciplines.

There is also the professional network of scholars in a more formalized group. This group may meet at conferences, workshops and seminars. They may also belong to the

same professional association. In this situation, the frequency of meeting may depend on the type of network.

National networks cut across a nation and might or might not require some agreed protocols on information transfer.

In the case of Regional and International Networks, there is definitely the need for a general agreement of protocols for trans-border information transfer. Some of the problems of Regional and International networking, especially in Africa, are language, customs duties, and copyright.

### **Modern Tools of Networking**

In order for a scientific network or system to operate efficiently and effectively, it requires an infrastructure as well as other elements. According to Ocholla (1992), elements which are essential for a scientific information system are human, financial and technical resources. For example, what is needed at the human level is active, motivated producers and consumers of information, personnel trained in information handling and transfer as well as a literate and enlightened community with the desire to be self-reliant and self-sufficient in the areas of science and technology. At the institutional level, manpower training, especially at higher levels, capable of transforming quantity into quality is crucial.

An effective scientific network also requires well established and productive research and academic institutions, information resource management capabilities, scientific and technical information centres including libraries and other information centres, capable of storing, transferring and disseminating information, an accurate record of scientific information holding as well as their adequate publicity and promotion. It also needs a national coordinating body in the form of a management body, such as a Ministry or Department in charge of research, science and technology (including related information activities). Good public relations, consultancy services including bilateral and multilateral information exchange and transfer agreements are also important. Furthermore, it also requires professional associations and institutions capable of generating and enhancing scientific and technological information and of developing the profession. In addition, at the technical level, an efficient network requires an adequate and open communication system, including transport, telecommunications and computer networks.

At the political level there is a need to formulate and implement appropriate information policies, guidelines, legislation and other regulatory and control mechanisms. A viable framework for the organization and management of intellectual property is also crucial in order to co-ordinate industrial information such as patents and standards, and a conducive political will and social climate (Kabudi, 2002).

## **Importance of Networks for Libraries**

Considering the fact that “no library can satisfy the dynamic and increased user demands for services”, networking is seen as a solution that will maintain satisfactory levels of service. Through networking resources, a group of libraries can be pooled together to ensure cost effectiveness in service provision. Experts have identified various factors that necessitate the need for networking. These include: shrinking resources, skyrocketing price of journals and other resources, the information explosion, avoiding duplication of efforts, dynamic and comprehensive user needs, developments in information technology and the need to promote optimum utilization of resources (Wijasurya, 1995 and Jalloh, 1999). Other factors that have acted as catalysts and renewed interest in networking include: developments in information technology, the availability of infrastructure that facilitates resource sharing, institutional goals and the need to use each other’s resources effectively. Alemna and Antwi (2002) point out that the main impetus to this new trend includes the need to enhance quality, reduce costs and to minimize duplication of efforts among libraries.

The rationale behind the trend towards networking and consortia building include the recognition that resource sharing plays a significant role in improving access, developing a comprehensive shared stock, sharing staff and expertise, technology and promoting optimum use of space. This means that co-operating libraries achieve enhanced access to reciprocal collections facilitated through inter-library loan and document delivery arrangements or direct access to electronic resources through networks. Co-operative

acquisition on the other hand enhances quality of stock and saves time and financial resources by avoiding duplication of efforts among participating libraries (Kiondo, 2003).

Indeed, the benefits of networking are numerous and when they are established, they also benefit the traditional area of operations such as acquisitions, cataloguing, exchange of materials, inter-library loan and staff development.

## **THE AFRICAN VIRTUAL LIBRARY AND INFORMATION NETWORK**

### **(AVLIN) CASE STUDY**

The African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN) is a network of virtual and digital libraries that will provide Internet-based information and knowledge assets, resources and service to policy makers and researchers from across the African continent. As the primary development network on economic and development information in Africa, AVLIN will connect people and institutions to help promote socio-economic development on the continent and bridge the digital divide. Also as a “gateway of gateways”, it will facilitate knowledge exchanges between policy makers and researchers by connecting them to leading African libraries, universities and information centres.

Implementation efforts aim to ensure complementarity with the African Information Society Initiative (AIS) and other knowledge initiatives.

## **Goals and Objectives of AVLIN**

- Stimulate the development of projects focusing on digital libraries and associated virtual library services in Africa;
- Build capacity at institutional, national and regional levels on the development of integrated virtual library services;
- Promote regional cooperation on standardization and virtual library system development;
- Facilitate research and developmental activities in both infrastructure and development of digital and virtual libraries;
- Provide access to appropriate content to help support development on the continent;
- Highlight the need for Africa-relevant research and development on digital information delivery for national development; and
- Offer a general framework, model and opportunity for the acquisition of concrete technical knowledge for effective development and management of digital libraries and electronic information network.

AVLIN has an Advisory Committee of nine members. The functions of the Advisory Committee are to:

- a. Advise the ECA Secretariat on general, technical and policy issues relating to the development of AVLIN;
- b. Advise on implementation strategies and framework as well as content of its work programme related to AVLIN;



- c. Propose approaches, actions and means for the mobilization of resources for the implementation of the project and other related activities and programmes that may emanate from it; and
- d. Promote and disseminate the activities of AVLIN to all stakeholders, including member states and sub-regional organizations.

### **Achievements to-date**

- Identification of Library and Information Infrastructure at Potential AVLIN Sites

The ECA Library administered a questionnaire in 2005 to survey a number of university libraries and research centres in the Africa region in order to help in the determination of information and knowledge infrastructures at potential AVLIN sites. This will help avoid duplication of efforts and resources in the region. Based on this assessment, it will be possible to plan out phased development for capacity building initiatives, equipment and exchanges.

- Capacity Building Activities

The organization of a technical workshop on digital libraries and electronic information networks (May, 2003) for some 20-25 participants from university libraries, etc. This was the first in a series of similar workshops/seminars intended to enhance professional competencies at participating institutions.

- Awareness raising and promotional activities

Efforts were made to promote awareness of AVLIN among many potential stakeholders and participating institutions, for example:

- Promotion activities for AVLIN including presentation of a paper on *The African Virtual Library and Information Network (AVLIN): A Regional Knowledge Exchange Initiative* to the 68<sup>th</sup> IFLA Council and General Conference, Glasgow, August, 2002.
- Preparation and dissemination of promotional leaflet on AVLIN (AVLIN in brief) to alert colleagues on the conceptual, structural and physical frameworks of the proposed network.
- Design and launch of an AVLIN web-site to share information on developments in digital and virtual libraries in Africa, best practices elsewhere ([www.uneca.org/library/avlin](http://www.uneca.org/library/avlin)).

- Fund Raising

Preparation of business plans for 2002, 2003-2005 outlining the key elements of activities to be undertaken by the project and to try and seek funding support. The ECA has provided seed money to kick start operations of AVLIN (UNECA, 2003).

- Knowledge, Libraries and Information Services for Development (KLIS)

The most recent achievement of AVLIN is the initiative to get libraries and information services to be accepted as a separate sub-committee under the Committee of Development Information (CODI) of ECA. Previously, libraries had been placed together with Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

### **Potential Barriers to AVLIN**

- Shortage of appropriate technical skills
- Lack of funds
- Inadequate copyright laws
- Lack of adequate technical infrastructure
- Limited access to ICT facilities
- Low public awareness

### **Partnership Arrangements (Networking)**

Within the Africa region, AVLIN works in tandem with regional organizations such as the Africa Union (AU), the African Development Bank (ADB) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), particularly its African Regional Section. Close consultations are already in place with the libraries of the AU and the ADB for collaboration in the establishment of their electronic libraries, using as far as possible, compatible standards, systems, networks and knowledge exchanges.

In order to facilitate collaboration with other African initiatives, e.g., the AAU/DATAD project, the African Digital Library, etc., the AVLIN Secretariat is pursuing actions to ensure that AVLIN works closely with these initiatives in order to avoid duplication and bring about greater synergies.

The project also seeks to work closely with organizations that have shown interest in development information and institutional networking, like the Danish International

Development Agency (DANIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC of Canada), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Joint World Bank/IMF Library, Ford Foundation, InfoDev and others whose activities complement those of the ECA and the planned activities of the project. Active co-operation and collaboration with other international and multilateral knowledge-producing centres of excellence in the development information sector is also being sought.

The ECA's five Sub-Regional Offices (SROs), located as they are in various parts of the African region, will provide critical inputs for the identification, selection and support for the implementation of joint activities with sub-regional institutions and centres of excellence which might eventually become affiliated with AVLIN.

AVLIN intends to strengthen its links with the academic community through strategic partnership arrangements, which will help to ensure complementary services to researchers and policy makers. In this way, the network will connect university libraries and departments of economics to the resources they need, both from ECA and the larger African academic community.

There is a discussion group forum, through which librarians and other individuals with an interest in developing the Information Society in Africa can share viewpoints with their peers. Inputs are welcome from any interested individual – to join the discussion groups (<http://www.dgroups.org/groups/avlin-1/>).

## **AVLIN: The way forward**

The future development of AVLIN will depend very much on institutional support and active collaboration from participating institutions. Participating institutions should have the appropriate capacities (in terms of institutional commitment, human resources, equipment, and other physical resources) in order to facilitate and benefit from participation in the activities of AVLIN.

For the coming three years, focus of AVLIN activities will be on:

- Capacity building initiatives
- Governance
- Fund raising and sustainability

It is expected that the AVLIN Advisory Committee (AAC) will review and provide policy guidance for the effective implementation of AVLIN planned activities.

AVLIN's success will be measured by:

- Number of library and information network nodes established and sharing knowledge resources;
- Number of knowledge exchanges and knowledge institutions connected with web-based library networks;
- Number and quality of capacity building training, meetings and workshops held; and
- Increase in adoption and adherence to international standards on information processing, management, communication and dissemination.

## **Conclusion**

In this era of globalization, networks and networking are very important especially for the library and information profession. This is because of the information explosion and all its ramifications, coupled with reduced funding for information centres. It would therefore seem to indicate that effective networks can go a long way to help alleviate the problems in information provision.

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