

Networking and Resource Sharing in Library and Information Services: the Case for Consortium Building

Glory Okeagu¹ &
Blessing Okeagu²

Abstract

Networking and Resource sharing have always been important factors in Library services. Formation of consortium appears to be the most viable means for Library cooperation. This work briefly traces the history of library cooperation in the UK, South Africa and Nigeria. It also examines the elements, benefits and challenges for consortium formation as crucial for library networking and resource sharing. Finally, it is concluded that libraries must face up to the reality of resource and information synergy in order to live up to the expectations of clients and society

Introduction

The so-called “Information Revolution” has made Libraries around the world to adopt new philosophies and technologies for service delivery and also reduce the cost of information. Maintaining the breath and depths of collections is the single greatest challenge confronting Libraries, be it, academic, special, national, or public. Failure to confront this challenge successfully and fundamentally threatens the Library’s mission and vision.

Libraries have realized that no matter how they are well funded, it is difficult to acquire all the materials needed by their clientele. In view of this fact, partnership and cooperation – local, national and international – have become inevitable for all libraries. One way of achieving cooperation is through the establishment of consortiums – a syndication arrangement which enables libraries to work together more effectively and efficiently.

¹ glokea@yahoo.com

² Bokeagu@cenbank.org

The terms consortium, networking, resource sharing, cooperation and partnerships are used inter-changeably in this article to refer to strategic alliances amongst libraries with the aim of meeting the demands of clients for services that are delivered faster and reliable. Reitz (2004) defines consortium as an association of independent Libraries and/or Library systems established by formal agreement, usually for, the purpose of resource sharing. Membership may be restricted to a specific geographic region, type of Library (academic, public, special) or subject specialization.

According to Buckley (1999), APT partnership in a review of Library and Information cooperation defined cooperation as the creation and generation of equitable, that is mutually 'fair', collaborative arrangement between Libraries and information providers which enhance the common good through making information available to all potential users (without obstacle to access by reason of cost) which is more extensive or more valuable to the user and/or is of lower cost to the collaborative providers. Reitz (2004) explained that resources sharing is the activity is the result from an agreement, formal and informal among a group of Libraries (usually a consortium or network) to share collections, data, facilities, personnel etc for the benefit of the users and to reduce the expense of collection development.

To underscore its importance, the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) in 2002 made it one of its professional priorities. Formalized resource sharing arrangements are growing. According to Usman (2006), these arrangements are usually the projects or institutionalized services such as inter-Library loan where a written agreement is a common feature of collaboration between the two or more Libraries especially when the geographic and political borders separate the participants. Reitz (2004) also described a network as a group of physically discrete computers inter-connected to allow resources to be shared and data exchanged, usually by means of tele-communication links and client/server architecture. Library network therefore, is a situation where two or more organizations are engaged in the exchange of information through common communication channels usually for the purpose of accomplishing shared objectives.

Networking is a way to gain access to a greater range of expertise and other resource and avoid duplication of efforts by the efficient use of available resources. This is done through the development of national and international linkages with numerous agencies both governmental and non-governmental working in related fields. Librarians do this by meeting colleagues at Library conferences, participation in colloquium etc.

Partnership is a term favoured by various governments in place of cooperative activities. Grosch (1995) identified the following issues as having characterized the Library cooperation movement: broadening access to materials, lowering the per unit cost of cataloguing, document delivery, bibliographic utilities and their role, cooperative acquisitions, copyrights, governance and other development based ventures. Therefore, it can be surmised that cooperation is the most effective behaviour to adopt in human relationships.

Cooperation means people working together on the basis of common interests. This means, for example that they take care to act in ways that do not damage each others interests. When it is not possible to meet everyone's interests, they agree joint plans of action that aim at sharing the pain on a basis that all regard as fair. A growing phenomenon in Nigeria is

individual coming together as groups for the sole purpose of contributing money towards a common purse. It may be daily, monthly, weekly. This is loaned any member who is in difficulty or at the end of the year the money is divided according to the amount contributed. The way it is arranged every member benefits from the scheme. It is happening in the market places (known as *Esusu* in Yoruba language) and corporate offices are not left out. Once cooperation exists, the key determinant of its continuing is reciprocity of cooperation.

Library cooperation around the world - a comparative overview

(1) United Kingdom

Buckley (1999) explained that formal cross-sectoral cooperation started in the 1930s with the setting up of Regional Library Systems (RLS) for inter-lending and catalogue sharing. These she stated are still going strong but the introduction of computerized catalogues and electronic networking has revolutionized the ways that business is transacted. The 60s and 70s saw more local cooperatives which not only concentrated on inter-lending but also encompassed sharing of information and training, and facilitated personal contacts between Librarians. In 1986, a Library and Information Plans (LIP) was launched with the philosophy: (1) that Library and Information services are a national heritage and require conscious national effort to maintain them (2) that these resources cannot be fully exploited unless provision is coordinated nationally and locally (3) Strategic planning will maximize existing library and information services, productivity and value (4) that planning will be most effective if first done at local level”.

Of the partnerships currently existing in the UK, some are emerging from the environment of local government reorganization, electronic networking, higher education sector infrastructures, and government plans for the information society. There is a significant change from geographically based partnerships to subject based.

Within the academic, the development of the Joint Academic Network (JANET), linking all higher education institutions, pioneered joint working and resource sharing. Online public access catalogue (OPACs), consortium purchasing of electronic materials, inter-loans and electronic-mail (e-mail) are part of its use by the academic community. Public Libraries are not left out; the Consortium for Public Library Networking came up with Project – Electronic Access to Resources in Libraries (EARL). This is a website developed by the London and South Eastern Library Regional Library System (LASER) which provides detail of services of 165 partners and gateways to specialist sites of interest to public Library users.

(2) South Africa

The landscape of the South African Library and information services sector was transformed with the establishment of the first formal Library Consortium, Cape Library Cooperative (CALICO) in 1992. Thomas and Fourie (2006) explained that apart from the government pressure to streamline Library and educational efforts, grants makers like the Andrew W Mellon Foundation insisted that it would only work with consortia rather than individual Libraries in the funding of Library systems project.

Between 1992-1998, five academic library consortia were established. Funding came majorly through grants and membership fees. The work in each consortium initially focused on the traditional role of consortia, namely purchasing a common Library system, resource sharing, joint purchasing of information resources and licensing agreements. The period of 1998 – 2003 saw the South Africa consortium consolidating their roles with the addition of new members.

Some of the objectives of the South Africa Consortia are:

- Promote formal relations between members to foster collaborations and networking
- Promote collection building and resource sharing
- Support optimal access to information for members through regional and national cooperation
- Improve information literacy skills and to share training resources and expertise
- Provide support for the implementation and management of common Library systems.

(3) Nigeria

Nwalo in his work cited Issa and Oyeleke (2000) where they traced the origin of formal inter-library cooperation in Nigeria to the meeting of the Working Group on Inter-Library lending held in 1974 at the instance of the National Library of Nigeria. The sub-sequent conference on cooperative acquisition held in Kaduna in 1980 resulted in the National Union Catalogue (NUC) and National Union of Serials (NULOS) projects.

Currently, only five Libraries are participating in the scheme out of the over hundred that joined at inception. National Library of Nigeria is however seriously planning an on-line union catalogue.

In 2004, the Committee of University Librarians of Nigerian Universities (CULNU) formed the Nigerian University Libraries Consortium (NULIC) to embrace all Universities with the view to expanding it to include all academic and research Libraries in Nigeria. Some of the objectives include:

- Promote resource sharing among members Libraries
- Make the academic resources of each member Library available to all others
- Ensure that member institutions contribute meaningfully towards sustaining the consortium etc.

The establishment of the National Virtual Library Project in 2001 by the Federal Ministry of Education with the mission to provide an equitable, cooperative and cost effective manner, enhanced access to national and international Library and information resource as well as sharing locally available resources with Libraries all over the world using digital technology

added impetus to the importance of resource sharing. In this scheme, Nigerian Universities are to contribute their research information which would be placed on line for sharing. Nigerian University Network (NUNET) is another initiative by National Universities Commission to encourage Universities to network and share information for their academic and administrative functions. Other resource sharing projects are the Nigerian Periodical Index (NPI) of the University Libraries of Nigerian Universities (CULNU) and the National Documentation and Library Center for Science and Technology (NADICEST) aimed at providing access to current and retrospective information on science and technology to facilitate research.

Elements of Consortium Building

From the foregoing history one can identify the essential elements in building a consortium:

1. **Mutual Objectives:** Before embarking on a consortium arrangement, each of the partnering entities needs to have a clear understanding of its objectives which must be developed and combined with those of the other partners. They are known as mutual objectives and are generally incorporated in a consortium agreement or charter.
2. **Joint Decision Making Process:** All problems and decisions whenever possible must be jointly owned and resolved by the team. The decision making process must be much more proactive and forward looking.
3. **Continuous Improvement:** All partners must continue to receive worthwhile benefits from the arrangement. This demands a continuous review of the partners' performance over the life of the consortium. The key performance indicators must be agreed upon before inception of the consortium arrangement.

Critical Success Factors (CSFs) of Consortium Building

In brief, the following are the critical factors for library consortium building:

- A shared vision and philosophies
- A well focused organization
- Perceived cost effectiveness
- Accessibility of the network's resources through local nodes
- Staff skills, attitudes and commitment
- The quality of response provided
- The depths and range of resources available
- Network visibility and the image projected to the outside world
- An ability to adapt overtime

Advantages of Consortium Building

The following are the key advantages of library consortium building:

- A comprehensive collection is possible
- Avoidance of duplication of non core collection development among the participating Libraries
- Reduction in the cost of information services
- Quality of services is enhanced
- Facilitation of the use of common Library system
- Promotion of best practices
- Implementation of staff skills development programmes.

Challenges of Consortium Building

Although there are essential elements that need to be observed in any consortium building, there are also challenges that need to be noted; they are:

- **Team work:**

Recognition of the value of each team member and his specialty, respecting each member's opinions and seeking understanding of each other's views contribute to team members feeling being valued and part of a team. Success is entirely dependent upon a compatible team rather than a well written consortium agreement.

- **Trust, openness and honesty:**

These are attributes that need to be encouraged and worked on by the partners. Trust will be built over time with each of the partners delivering their commitments. Trust will drastically cut down the cost of running a consortium where partners constantly cross check information from other partners to avoid being taken advantage of. Trust of course requires openness and no room for hidden agenda. Libraries coming together to form consortium must make careful choice of partners. If every member is treated fairly then no one will need to waste time worrying about money issues. For example, business organizations are protective privileged information concerning any prospective venture they are pursuing. All the parties are expected to disclose all information that is beneficial to the consortium.

- **Win-win approach:**

Any relationship will last as long as all partners are receiving an acceptable benefit from it rather than working for individual short term gains, the benefit of the consortium as a whole is considered. When every member of the consortium has the feeling that they are part of the team creates the drive towards win-win. Once the win-win mindset is place, the synergies will be noticeable. The

contributions of all members should be recognized and appreciated no matter how small. No Library should be made to feel less superior to the other.

- **Change management:**

The culture of formation of consortia will represent a new orientation to the traditional culture of stand alone Libraries. The approach cannot be successful without recognizing that there is likely to be a large amount of historical baggage to offload. A cultural change will be required with most Libraries, and this is probably one of the biggest hurdles to overcome. To manage the issue of change, Libraries need to develop a gradual but effective change management programme covering all level of their organizations. Fear of the unknown causes most resistance. The fear of job cut, new systems, ideas, and schemes may be sore points unless well addressed.

Conclusive remarks

With the liberalization of information through Information Communication Technology (ICTs), Libraries are beginning to Shift their focus from accumulation and ownership of information resource to providing access. The increase in the value and demand of information continues to exert pressure on Libraries to offer more effective services to their users. Libraries and information providers around the world are strategically partnering to accomplish this goal.

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