

APLESA: Unlocking the Untapped Potential

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Overview

- Introduction
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Introduction

- APLESA is a member organization with specific functions namely;
- Promoting cooperation and resource sharing
- Establishing an effective and efficient information delivery service for APLESA stakeholders
- Promoting communication and networking among its members (APLESA Annual Report, 2006/07)
- APLESA is an association of parliamentary libraries of the East and Southern Africa. Since its formation in 1994, I have observed that this association has succeeded in some areas and faced many challenges in other area.

Achievements

- APLESA was formed 15 years ago
- In that time APLESA even if it has done nothing, has been able to survive the test of time.
- The Association is alive.
- It has organized some regional workshops i.e Kampala in July 2001,
- Its constitution was reviewed in 2002,
- Training needs analysis was done by some individual member parliaments
- Two new members joined namely Ethiopia and Mozambique.
- The Association has been able to create awareness of the value we attach to public information generated, conserved and used in parliamentary process.

Challenges

- Both internal and external.
- Internally the Association has not been able to convene conferences annually
- Committees have been rather dormant
- No elections have been held since the term of office of the present regime elapsed 5 years ago
- Inability of some member countries to host meetings when called up on
- Inability to implement some of the agreed decisions e.g those made in Mombasa in 2003.

Internal Challenges Contd.

- Other challenges include
- Poor follow ups
- Weak commitment to the ideals of the association
- Poor understanding of the philosophy of the association
- Inadequate marketing leading to less attraction of sympathy of their governing bodies to support it
- Collapse of APLESA website
- Weak mobilization by the executive
- Inadequate capacity in the Association to handle strategic issues of importance to itself
- inadequate funding of APLESA activities.

External Challenges

- The external factors may also influence the internal factors.
- APLESA has received lukewarm support from organizations abroad
- Uneven developments in member countries have created disparities in commitment and support to APLESA
- Absence of uniform standards in managing information resources hence poor networking
- Uneven information and communication technology developments in the region

Opportunities

- We cannot lose hope
- This paper aims at making us aware that we have work to do to improve upon the situation.
- There are opportunities we must take on to get back on the rails again.
- So far we have with us the needed frameworks that include:
- Institutional framework e.g. parliaments and parliamentary libraries
- Need for networking as already suggested by political developments such as NEPAD, SADEC, IGAD, EAC, African Union and other partnerships that can be developed

Opportunities Contd.

- E-parliament; a project that will quicken our connections
- Research
- Capacity building
- Multiple media technologies that are rapidly diffusing on Africa continent
- Democracy and globalization that is assuring us of the inevitable

Untapped potential

- Unlocking the untapped potential remains a professional issue for the conference to discuss
- First APLESA needs an effective marketing system.
- Second APLESA works towards harmonized ICT system to enable information sharing on a similar but standard system. This will also allow data sharing i.e. access to global and regional information.
- Third, we need to show and practice commitment to this Association i.e. active leadership and management of the Association

Untapped Potential Contd.

- Three things to understand in unlocking the potential:
 - Role of parliament and parliamentary library
 - Role of research
 - Role of information services

Role of parliament

- Parliament as centre for convergence of representation of interest is alive when the various aspects of its work are supported by library, research and information services.
- Thilakarathne (2005) noted that parliament has grown into a multi-functional institution performing variety of roles that include:
- Legitimizing function – legitimizing what the government does; representational functions from which follows the grievance ventilation or grievance redressal function; national integration function; and conflict resolution function and the leadership and training function.

Role of parliament Contd.

- It is from this point that the need for authentic, objective and timely information or data for parliament and their members has grown.
- Besides, the dissemination of information generated by parliament through its functional process has to be considered seriously.
- People must have proper access to these information to judge the performance of their representatives, to make decisions, in addition to the usefulness of this information for members.

Roles of parliament library and information service

- First the traditional function of the library serving members of parliament.
- The second, serving citizens of their countries
- Third which is the reason for the existence of APLESA is building partnerships through networking.

NB: The last two functions remain untapped and need unlocking if we are to benefit from this association.

Traditional function

- Traditionally parliamentary library and information services are meant to serve parliamentarians. As the public information system this library is meant to provide members quickly, precisely and sufficiently detailed, information members of parliament may require in the exercise of their duties as representatives of the people (Kimbunga, 1996).
- Other functions include: locating fugitive material and assembling complex information for members of parliament, keeping the proceedings of parliament, documentation to cater for reference needs of members and officers of parliament committees.

Traditional function Contd.

- Research, indexing important articles in newspapers and journals and publications of national and international organizations, maintaining a press clippings service, managing a digital library of electronic publications such as DVDs, CDs, tapes and maintaining parliament web page, research service, compilation of bibliographies, translation services, photocopying, current awareness service and selective dissemination of information service are some of the functions.
- To use Uganda parliamentary service I see the missing link as the marketing of the service to the public. Could this be the case in other APLESA member countries? I have not seen a bibliography of parliament.

Serving citizens

- Secondly parliamentary library and information services are expected to serve the citizens of their countries with unique primary information arising out of the work of parliament.
- Parliamentary library, research and information service collects vital documents like government reports, reports of international organizations, etc and creates its own reports arising out of debates and keeps them as the record of primary literature for future or immediate reference.
- The population of a country namely journalists, researchers, students, and individual information seekers would find such collection most useful for their own purposes.
- The role of parliamentary library and information services would be identifying information resources needed for parliament work and make and present modalities for sharing its or such information.

Serving citizens Contd.

- The role of APLESA members is to commit their Parliaments to local communities by making themselves accessible and participative as national level specialized information systems throughout their countries. A good example is the Scottish parliament which as part of its Parliament's outreach services partners with local libraries to facilitate outreach and engagement opportunities by linking its website with those of other libraries (The Scottish Parliament, 2008).
- Local libraries act as focal points in local communities for information from and about the Parliament. These libraries ensure that individuals have access to accurate, authoritative and up to date information from parliament, its business and decisions.
- This is one of the ways in which parliament delivers on its commitment to be open, accessible, accountable and participative. Information is made available through printed publications, as well as through the Internet.
- This point is reinforced from Finland which states that it is extremely important for the functioning of the open society that citizens are informed of the decision making procedures and their results.
- The need for accessibility in a wider meaning is implied by the availability of publications guides the strategy selections of the Library even when decisions concerning automation are made (Siunala, 2008?).

Partnerships and Networking

- The third untapped potential is the building of regional and international networking or partnerships that hinge on cooperation and coordination, acceptance of standards, and harmonization.
- The way ahead leads from national and regional to international solutions (Siunala, 2008). This is because effective use of information and innovations is based on interaction and sharing.
- Since Africa is fairly and with many countries, the role of APLESA is to promote wide and build parliamentary information partnerships.
- Partnering or simply partnership is defined as a collaboration or strategic alliance between one or more individuals or groups (Finsten & Young, 2007).

Partnerships and Networking Contd.

- The value of partnering is to add value to services while controlling costs. In the APLESA region, parliamentary libraries should be partnering to achieve results relevant to their strategic objectives and priorities in situations where partnering offers distinct advantages in terms of results compared with other approaches. For instance partnering can improve, enhance and extend services such as answering frequently asked questions in parliament in ways that are important to our Parliamentary clients.
- Partnering can also enhance links with stakeholders, networks, knowledge communities; it can improve visibility and credibility of clients, strengthen national and international networks, foster leadership role in areas such as preservation and retrieval of legislative documents and in promoting understanding of parliamentary democracy.
- It can also improve, enhance and extend services in ways that are important to clients, and is useful in gaining access to critical information.

Tapping APLESA potential

- As said earlier, APLESA is untapped potential. Areas if tapped that could make this association more visible, and strong include:
 - Advantage of operating and expanding as a regional block
 - Peace prevailing in the region
 - Availability of parliamentary library in each of the member countries
 - Good will from the political leadership and donors
 - Trained human resources running the parliamentary library and services
 - Internet connectivity and other ICTs
 - Local and international Media

Tapping APLESA potential Contd.

- The challenge therefore is if information is going to help Africa, whose role is it to make this information available?
- Is it not us the information professionals?
- If we are not, then I beg to be informed who else has the knowledge and skills to do so.

Tapping APLESA potential contd.

- What are the products we can benefit from APLESA?
- How can APLESA empower our citizens to correct and even peacefully overturn our governments, build economic success and social welfare, dispel misinformation and ignorance of truth, and preserve justice for our people against the tyranny of the powerful?
- In the language of peace, we ask: how can APLESA promote free access to information and expression in the way it works in western democracies?
- How can these ideals be brought into practice by parliamentary libraries in Africa?
- What kind of African provision of government information and information about government best serve democracy, economic growth and public education?

Tapping APLESA potential Contd.

- While the answer to the first question is that APLESA has definitely good intentions, it is the actualization of its soul that is a bottleneck. I defend this statement because it was in July 2001 when I last participated in APLESA seminar until a month ago when I learnt that APLESA is coming to Kampala.
- The second question is the role of parliamentary library. I would like to say that libraries of parliaments anywhere in the world have specific functions and most of them are similar. The only differences come from the nature of parliament itself. For instance there are parliaments that are unicameral while others are bicameral parliaments. Whatever model it takes, there are fundamental roles. For instance in Sri Lanka, the Parliament Library of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) holds the responsibility of fulfilling the information requirements of Parliament and its members and why can't African parliamentary libraries do so as well?

Conclusion

- APLESA is an important association in our region.
- I urge everyone to support it in a every way possible.
- With combined efforts, APLESA should be able to serve the embers better.
- There are challenges as well as opportunities to harvest.
- The potential is there but needs unlocking.
- The earlier we realize this, the better for the association.
- Let's leave this Conference aware that we need to put in more effort and commitment to APLESA and together we can do so.

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Thank You!