

APLESA: Unlocking the Untapped Potential

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Introduction

Life is about a communion. Since pre historic to the present times, human beings are living in a communion. This associative behavior has a long history behind it. But one can say that by coming together into groups human beings were and have been able to support each other in times of need. This behavior has culminated into a cultural characteristic to last into eternity. This paper underscores the importance of this understanding or associative model of living together and cannot enumerate situations when and why associative behavior is important. Instead it argues that if the habit of association were not useful, people in modern times would have not continued to practice such behavior. Perhaps another way of living would have been found. The modern method of this coming together is reflected in the formation of formalized groups called associations. Human beings have come to understand that coming together and forming associations has benefits to achieve than working or staying individually. Associations pull people together into group behavior to assure common purpose, to gain synergy resulting from common efforts and as a guaranteed way to forge ahead with a strong voice, united thought and common purpose. It is for this reason that today we are part of or witness that there are a myriad of associations to serve different interest needs. This paper is about APLESA with the underlying need to tap its untapped potential.

According to Longman Dictionary of the English Language (1984) an association is described as being the act of associating or the state of being associated; a partnership, or organization of people having a common interest; a society, a league, a union linked in memory, thought or imagination. In this definition, we discern that the common attribute is a linkage for a purpose. It is for that that we have collective interests like association of psychologists, chemists, pharmacists and librarians. In this paper the focus is on one association, APLESA– a regional association of parliament libraries of East and Southern Africa. This association was formed in Zambia in 1994. The aim of this association is to serve as a forum for professional networking and resource sharing amongst parliamentary libraries in the sub region thereby creating one common platform to advance the information exchange that would support the function of parliaments of the region, thereby facilitating in strengthening democracy and good governance (APLESA Annual Report 2006/07). The argument was that libraries serving parliaments in the region did not have all the resources they needed to deliver efficient and effective information services to their members of parliament (MPs). By forming the Association, APLESA would advance inter

parliamentary library cooperation within Eastern and Southern Africa enabling Parliaments, through networking and information resource sharing, to make informed decisions?

It is fifteen years since its formation, as a membership organization, it is prudent to ask questions: has APLESA lived to its expectation? How effective has APLESA been? If not, what challenges lie before it? What needs to be done to make APLESA reposition itself to achieve the mission it was created to serve?

Whereas the creation of APLESA fulfilled the demand side it is the supply side that demands answers. It is not unusual to seek such answers because there have been many associations the world over that have become failed intentions or experiments in meeting peoples' expectations or building partnerships. Reasons for failure are in most cases attributed to failure resulting from inadequate understanding behind the philosophy of their formation, poor conceptualization of the benefits to derive from them, inadequate funding, or failed subscriptions, undemocratic methods of managing associations or interest just wanes. Nkhoma-Wamunza (2002:289) provides arguments why people join associations. He suggests that people join associations to distinguish themselves from the masses, align themselves to a group that behaves differently or a group that is governed by standards set by the group, keep abreast of developments in their fields of expertise or in order to understand their roles and expectations better. Other do it to influence professional goals, ethics, and standards and/or for political, social, economic and cultural reasons and many rely on membership fees.

In hoping to achieve its objectives membership is often voluntary in which case effectiveness of the association depends on high level commitment from the leadership and members. Can we say APLESA has this level of commitment? Another factor in the survival of an association is the quality of its leadership, members and programmes. Could we say APLESA has achieved these? Without appearing to be doing the audit of the APLESA but it is also important that association such as this one benefits from synergy of diversity, expertise and experiences of its members. By your presence at this conference we can say this has been achieved. This paper is not suggestive that APLESA has failed but it is interested in learning how it has performed bearing in mind that it has an important role to play in regional development we are in at the present time.

By nature of its formation APLESA is made up of parliamentary libraries acting as information arms of parliament. These libraries are run by professional librarians and therefore are expected to have strong influence on the public from its information serve delivery. As an association guided by commitment laid out in its constitution and taking advantage of the prevailing peace and tranquility in the region, it is

expected that there would be a lot of information activity coming out of the association for the benefit of the membership. I would say that I have been one of those persons who have seen little activity from APLESA. The last time I participated in its seminar was August 2001 in Kampala. And it was only last month I read that APLESA seminar was coming to Kampala again after such a long period of time. It is at this point that I would like to take an audit of APLESA as an important information unit for coordinating and promoting the sharing of information from member states parliaments.

This paper discusses ways through which APLESA potential can be tapped. My belief is that this association has a lot to offer but has been struggling to make impact within its means. By its constitution, the import is that APLESA is a member organization with specific functions namely;

- Promoting cooperation and resource sharing among member countries
- 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

It is fifteen years since the formation of APLESA. In that time APLESA even if it has done nothing, has been able to survive the test of time. The Association is alive. It is perhaps its activities that have been low perhaps. The Association has been able to organize some regional workshops such the one we had in Kampala in July 2001, its constitution was reviewed in 2002, training needs analysis was done by some individual member parliaments, and 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

APLESA like many public organizations faces challenges in attempting to serve its membership. These challenges can be classified into two, internal and external. Internally literature shows that the

Association has not been able to convene conferences annually to discuss issues affecting her, committees have been rather dormant, no elections have been held since the term of office of the present regime elapsed five years ago, inability of some member countries to host the meetings when called up on, inability or failure to implement some of the agreed decisions such as those made in Mombasa in 2003. Other challenges in my view include poor follow ups, and inadequate funding. And I imagine that there has also been weak commitment to the ideals of the association from its membership, 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, and inadequate funding of APLESA activities.

The external factors may also influence the internal factors. Many of these external challenges and complicating factors are interrelated. For instance APLESA has received lukewarm support from organizations abroad, uneven developments in own countries have created disparities in commitment and support to APLESA, absence of uniform standards in managing information resources thence 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 that we must take on to get back on the rails again. So far we have with us the needed frameworks. These 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
- 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 us in the conference to discuss. First and in my view APLESA needs an effective marketing system. Second we need to agree here that 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, all of us need to show and practice commitment to this Association. Most importantly the leadership and management of the Association should be active. And once we achieve or work towards this then we can explore the untapped potential. There are three things to understand here, that is the role of parliament and parliamentary library, research and information services.

Parliament as centre for convergence of representation of interest is alive when its various aspects of its work are supported by library, research and information services. While discussing the changing dimensions of parliamentary library and information services in Sri Lanka in the third millennium Thilakarathne (2005) has noted that parliament has grown into a multi-functional institution performing variety of roles, and these 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. This is as true of Sri Lanka as it is about African parliaments or as elsewhere. In this way we find that the process of parliament and the members participating in that process requires vast amount of information as the Parliament arrives to a collective decision on every issue placed before it after debates, deliberations, discussions and so on and ultimately with majority consensus. 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 itself through its functional process has to be considered seriously. People must have proper access to these to judge the performance of their representatives, to make decisions at appropriate times, in addition to the usefulness of this information for members. This calls into question the roles of parliament library and information service. In this paper I try to distinguish these as three.

First the traditional function of the library serving members of parliament. The second is its expected role of serving citizens of their countries and third which is the reason for the existence of APLESA is

building partnerships through networking. The last two functions remain untapped and need unlocking if we are to benefit from this association.

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. 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.

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. This is because 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. It is my feelings that these functions are being performed and justify why parliamentary library and information services exist. The role therefore 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?).

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 wide and with many countries, the role of APLESA is to promote 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). 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.

Strategy

How would APLESA do so to achieve this through networking? This paper suggests that APLESA would be the link between people and the parliamentary libraries. Uganda would for instance learn about decisions of regional importance discussed from Malawi through APLESA and seek for this information through Uganda parliamentary library and supply it to the person in need. We may say it is difficult but

why is it that in the region political leaders are working towards wider political federations or political economic zones such as SADEC? Since some of the debates for this union are conducted in various capitals, the work of APLESA becomes more relevant. APLESA representation in each country would be engaged in collecting such data for other countries for the benefit of their countries parliamentarians as well as the public. Information emanating from different capitals would be a good source of data and information about how different countries are thinking on the same topics. This would strengthen south to south cooperation.

On the international front, we have entered into what is termed as globalization. This is a very broad concept but of utmost importance to all of us and to every country. First we do not and cannot as Africa operate in isolation of other parts of the world or else we shall be left behind for eternity. African countries have a lot to understand from other continents or countries in terms of good governance, trade, geo politics, education, research and so on. Countries of Africa trade with others some have economic and bilateral agreements between themselves, in others there are connections with finance institutions such as African Development Bank, World Bank or with other organizations like IFAD, WTO credit groups like IFC and so on. Issues about linkages with such organizations are discussed in parliaments. Therefore information about linkages with such bodies passes through parliaments that debate about them. Therefore it would be the role of parliamentary libraries to collect such information for the benefit of their countries and the region. APLESA's role would be to work as a clearing house for information on such organizations and disseminate them in their own countries.

Tapping APLESA potential

As said earlier, APLESA is untapped potential. There are many areas that could if tapped make this association more visible, and strong. These 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

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. To prove the value of information I refer us to Kirkwood (2006). While presenting a paper on *strengthening free access to information and free expression through libraries in Africa* Kirkwood stated “free access to information and freedom of expression (FAIFE) empowers the citizens of the western democracies to correct and even peacefully overturn their governments, to build economic success and social welfare, to dispel misinformation and ignorance of truth, and to preserve justice for the citizen against the tyranny of the powerful.”

To apply Kirkwood’s statement to benchmark Africa, the questions that arise are: what are the products that 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?

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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