
IASSIST Collaboration In Africa

Abstract

From a research-collaboration perspective, African researchers have many opportunities to learn from the international community. The International Association for Social Science Information Services and Technology (IASSIST) possesses the resources and intellectual capacity to play a more meaningful role in information sharing and exchange of best practices in quantitative research service delivery. The aim of this paper is to make recommendations with regard to the way in which IASSIST can bring about closer collaboration between its international members and the African region. Closer collaboration could boost the interest of researchers in quantitative research and secondary data analysis, using the new technologies and the services of the existing African national data archives.

Introduction

This paper aims to address closer collaboration between the International Association for Social Science and Information Service Technology (IASSIST) and the African region. Firstly, it gives an overview of the political and socio-economic conditions in Africa and how these conditions hamper the development in the region. Secondly, it deals with the attempts made at regional stability, and finally the role IASSIST can play assisting social science data utilisation in Africa.

Political and socio-economic problems hampering connectivity in Africa

The most familiar landscape painted of Africa is one of a poverty-stricken, politically unstable, war-torn continent. This picture is not entirely exaggerated, but it is beginning to show signs of positive change. Some African scholars believe that there is a “dawning realisation that the impetus for long-range social and economic development is informed by scientific knowledge, technological innovation, entrepreneurial management, and good leadership to transform the harsh conditions of the continent and how it is perceived by itself and others”. (Odhiambo, T.p.2).

The African continent has much to learn from the international community with regard to innovation in

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the application of scientific expertise and in service delivery. IASSIST has the intellectual capacity, as well as the global network to bring about closer collaboration in the area of quantitative machine-readable social science data. Closer collaboration between IASSIST and Africa implies many challenges.

As the second largest continent with an estimated population of 700 million people, Africa is marked with many contradictions. Although richly endowed with natural resources, it is plagued with abject poverty, economic underdevelopment, and shifting political agendas, those problems are compounded by high rates of illiteracy.

Articles in the news media constantly highlight the pessimism with which local and foreign journalists paint the African political and economic landscape. Africa’s current situation and prognostications for the future are reported in terms of general desolation, ruthless state brutality, unbridled corruption and social dysfunction. African political leaders are held responsible for self-inflicted failure and poor political leadership prevalent in the region. The political leaders are accused of self-aggrandisement, procrastination, pilfering of state funds, and indulging in empty rhetoric. This allegation seems to find substance in ambitious projects with no economic utility that is to be found in some of the most severely poverty-stricken African countries. A well-known example is the Notre Dame de la Paix Basilica in the Ivory Coast, which was built to rival the grandeur of the St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. (Africa News, 2001)

Studies on Africa reflect contrasting viewpoints of the current African situation. They sketch a picture of gloom, with occasional rays of hope breaking through as depicted in the following example. Studies show that many universities in Africa have been in a state of crisis for a long time. This is exacerbated by limited budgets, a shortcoming which leads to low morale among faculty and students. An increased sense of isolation and lagging behind in education makes it difficult for universities to attract and retain top quality professors. Too few graduates are produced from programs that are relevant to development, and therefore, too little knowledge related

directly to urgent African needs is generated.

On the positive side, in Angola, the Roman Catholic Church established a Catholic university as a substitute for the public university that had been destroyed in civil war. This enterprise was an attempt to rebuild research infrastructure aimed at restoring access to higher learning. There also seems to be a flicker of hope in the case of the University of Sierra Leone. This university decided to follow an orderly set of procedures to put them on their way to reform. These procedures include a clear definition of the objectives for reform, a detailed examination of all system elements, and a selection of key elements that need to be influenced. African theorists are of the opinion, however, that only managerial commitment and a sound injection of financial resources will ensure the success and sustainability of this initiative. Even in difficult circumstances innovations are emerging in Africa to improve the enabling environment for the higher education system.

Connectivity in Africa

Solving the problems experienced in the African region requires a great deal of scientific investigation. Scientific problem solving, however, requires valid and reliable information. Africa lacks the research capacity to generate data, which is comparable, consistent, reliable and appropriate in this regard. James Dean, Director of Programmes at the Information Institute in Panos, is of the opinion that Africa will not be a fully 'wired' society for a long time. However, there are a few countries on the continent that have done well in promoting technological networking, namely, Senegal, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mali, Uganda, Mozambique, Egypt, Kenya and Tunisia. The Ivory Coast used to have connectivity through BITNET, but those links were discontinued due to lack of sustainability planning. Noteworthy initiatives are the examples of the Kenya Computer Institute (KCI) and the African Regional Centre for Technology Information System (ARCTIS) serving 11 African Countries.

The KCI uses electronic mail as a tool for information exchange in the developing world. At present, it is the main means of facilitating collaboration between Kenya, some other African states, and the international community. The KCI provides communication infrastructure and computing facilities, management support, human resources, sustainability, and motivation. International memberships include the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden, Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore. From the African region, only Kenya and Uganda are active members. The KCI seems to be the largest and fastest growing electronic network of African scientists. This constitutes a unique pool of Kenyan expertise that could become the means to national development of information technology application in the region. The institute has experience with cutting-edge

and mainstream technology, including TCP/IP (protocols) which provide Internet connectivity.

The other example is that of ARCTIS. It is an African regional network supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada. This network handles a wide range of numerical and non-numerical, graphical, and full-text technological information relevant to socio-economic development of Africa. It is linked with several national and international facilities and information sources, and serves as a network using hardware based on local area network and wide area network configurations.

Another noteworthy factor is the existence of other small communities of dedicated electronic networks in Africa, namely, the Non-governmental Network (NGONET) and the Health Network (HEALTHNET) to name a few.

The initiatives cited serve to confirm that Africa holds great possibilities despite the many challenges facing it. It is with a sense of encouragement that one perceives the perseverance of some African scholars and the donor community support to sustain these initiatives. The documentation of these success stories is important for future benchmarking and follow-up.

Few as the existing pockets of research networks in the African region may be, there are clear indications that the region is moving towards workable solutions to its vast problems.

ATTEMPTS AT REGIONAL STABILITY AND INTEGRATION

The Southern African Development Community (SADC)

Several collective attempts at regional stability and integration are underway in the African region. This is evident from initiatives such as the Southern African Development Community, Treaty for Enhanced East African Co-operation, and the Economic Community of West Africa.

The main aim of these initiatives is to pursue integration and greater co-operation between economies in the African region. (Brümmerhoff, 2001). Another objective is to establish a culture of self-sufficiency that could serve as an impetus for social renewal on the continent.

The role of South Africa in the renewal of the African region

As a member of SADC, South Africa is also viewed as the economic 'powerhouse' of the African continent. Consequently, it is required to make substantial contributions locally and internationally within the area

of scientific investigation, to assist in the renewal of the continent.

It should be borne in mind, however, that South Africa is also a society in transition, one that is grappling with serious socio-economic issues like the HIV/AIDS pandemic, malnutrition among certain population groups, unresolved conflicts with their roots in the apartheid era, an urgent need for economic transformation and a diverse cultural heritage. As a result of these societal demands there is a growing need for social science research data in South Africa. This is verifiable through reports generated by the National Research Foundation in Pretoria.

The application of social science data in Africa.

South Africa is deemed to be the only African country with a well-established information infrastructure. Without going into the dubiousness of its motivation, the previous Nationalist Party government ensured that South Africa had the necessary structures and research institutions to execute research in social development issues. Here, the Human Sciences Research Council, the Medical Research Council and the Water Research Commission are cited as examples. Despite the strong infrastructure, however, there exists a dire need for awareness and demystification of quantitative analysis. A workshop held by the South African Data Archive in 1997 reflected practical problems experienced by researchers in the analysis and interpretation of data, as well as the manipulation of the data using computerised statistical packages. It has been noted that the rapid advances in computer technology exacerbate these problems. Addressing these problems would be beneficial for any future research efforts not only in South Africa, but also in the broader region.

The National Research Foundation has identified research focus areas to accommodate the investigation of issues such as HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, compact resources, etc. as mentioned above to make use of the unique opportunity available to South African social scientists. Researching these issues presents an opportunity for South Africa to obtain a better understanding of the African situation and the role South Africa could play in social and economic development in the region. However, it is not known how many current attempts at capacity building in social science research are addressing these problems.

Impact of collaboration between IASSIST and Africa

In keeping with social, economic and technological development, collaboration and global exchange of information are becoming more important for the development of underdeveloped countries. IASSIST plays a pivotal role in bringing together social science users and producers of data. The linkage already existing between South Africa and IASSIST could only serve to benefit the whole of the region. South Africa, viewed to have the most developed information infrastructure, seems to be in the

best position to be the first port of call for strengthening of collaboration between IASSIST and Africa. This could become the benchmark for Operation Outreach initiatives in the region.

The IASSIST vision and mission already include a collaborative focus. This is found in the Outreach objectives and programmes of the association. The objectives are to:

- Encourage and support the establishment of local and national information centres for social science machine-readable data;
- Foster international exchange and dissemination of information regarding substantive and technical development related to social science machine-readable data;
- Co-ordinate international programs and projects and general efforts that provide a forum for discussion of issues relating to social science machine-readable data; promote the development of standards for social science machine-readable data;
- Encourage educational experiences for personnel engaged in work related to these objectives.” (IASSIST Constitution)

These objectives tie in very well with the social science research needs of the African region.

Recommendations

The following list of recommendations serves to provide options for closer working ties between IASSIST and the African region. The list is neither comprehensive, nor prescriptive. Its purpose is to provide IASSIST and the African regional representation with a starting point for further discussions.

The recommendations are:

- Expand the regional secretariat into an action committee to manage the IASSIST/ AFRICA affairs in the African region. Infrastructural assistance could be sought through strategic discussions with the South African Data Archive and the National Research Foundation, as well as institutions of higher learning.
- Organise an IASSIST/AFRICA awareness campaign, with an initial focus on South Africa, to create awareness of the global network among South African social science individuals. The idea is to target social science graduate students, social scientists and information professionals. This could be done through an IASSIST/AFRICA marketing pamphlet and a questionnaire to stimulate their awareness of quantitative

research resources and facilities, and of the existence of IASSIST and possible membership.

- Create an electronic mailing list to disseminate IASSIST information, news and upcoming events, with links to the IASSIST homepage.
- Market IASSIST and the data centres at the annual conferences of the South African Online Users Group (SAOUG), the Library Association of South Africa (LIASA), and the Standing Committee of African Libraries (SCESCAL) in an attempt to reach information professionals that could be instrumental to establishing of data libraries at their residential academic or research institutions.
- Build capacity through research methodology and data analysis training. Arrange regular symposia and workshops on data archiving and secondary analysis, addressing the problems as identified earlier in the paper, targeting universities and technikons. Sponsorships could be sought from the National Research Foundation, Medical Research Council, and Statistics South Africa.
- Circulate the available training material on the IASSIST web site to members with the permission of the authors and the IASSIST Administrative Committee, to assist in the capacity building exercise.
- Convene symposia, workshops, seminars and training sessions on any subject consistent with the IASSIST objectives for networking purposes.
- Publish an IASSIST/AFRICA one-page newsletter customised for the African region, and reflecting IASSIST news and events, e.g. regional news and important announcements from the Administrative Committee, funding opportunities, and upcoming conferences on machine-readable data analysis to be held in the region.
- Tap into the network of the various consortiums to market IASSIST, the national data archive and other data centres
- Form a data library interest group under the guidance of the IASSIST objectives and joint co-operation of the LIASA leadership.
- Encourage national archives similar to that of the South African Data Archive in the rest of Africa, starting with the Southern African Development Community and Sub-Saharan countries.
- Strengthen linkages between African universities and IASSIST-linked institutions abroad.

- Create opportunities for individuals to attend IASSIST/IFDO conferences to interact with colleagues both in Africa and abroad.

Some of the recommendations require IASSIST intervention, whereas the rest depend on local awareness, support and regional commitment.

Conclusion

Despite the serious obstacles in Africa, there is cause for optimism. The seriousness of the African plight is not irreversible. What is needed, though, are more resources, structural analysis, evaluation and scientific investigation by African scholars. Affiliations between IASSIST and the South African Data Archive have made huge contributions towards machine-readable social science data archiving in South Africa under the leadership of Dr. Maseka Lesaoana. Closer collaboration could only assist in enhancing the existing professional working relationship.

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