

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE DAG HAMMARSKJOLD LIBRARY: BRIDGING THE INFORMATION GAP BETWEEN DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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It is an honour and a privilege to be invited to participate in this Symposium, and I am delighted to be here today. I wish to thank the Dag Hammarskjold Library for this very kind invitation. I bring greetings and best wishes from the University of the South Pacific on this 40th Anniversary celebration.

Much has happened in the field of information in the past 40 years, and there is no doubt that the role of the Dag Hammarskjold Library has evolved and changed over the years.

In the networked knowledge-based global economy of today, information is a crucial and strategic resource for economic growth and sustainable development.

With developments in information and communications technology, information is now easily accessible in "developed" countries, and in certain sectors of "developing" countries. But much of the "developing" world suffers from a paucity of information, resulting in marginalisation and disadvantages.

The South Pacific region is no different from other developing countries in this respect. The "Information Gap" in the South Pacific

The University of the South Pacific serves 12 island countries in the South Pacific region: Cook Islands, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Tokelau, Niue, Nauru and Marshall Islands.

These islands are some of the most isolated geographically from the rest of the world. They have very small populations, ranging from a mere 4,000 in Niue and Tokelau to less than a million in Fiji.

Because of the geographical spread and isolation, it has been very difficult to build cost effective and efficient national infrastructures.

The lack of economies of scale has hindered the development of even the most basic of services (e.g. water, electricity and transport), let alone the development of an efficient information infrastructure.

Communications are often erratic and costly: access to a telephone service is far from universal, line quality can be poor, travel by any means of transport (road, ship or air) is limited as well as expensive, postal communication is generally slow and unresponsive, although fax and more recently electronic

There is a lack of understanding and appreciation of the value of information. Most people do not know how to find the information they need and how to use the information they find to reach a decision.

The Role of the Dag Hammarskjold Library

The Dag Hammarskjold Library has played a significant role in bridging the information gap through the depository library system. In the South Pacific, there are 7 UN depository libraries whose collections have enhanced the information base in a region that largely suffers from a severe lack of information. These are:

USP Library, Fiji: Depository Library for ILO, UN (since 1969), Unesco (since 1977), and World Bank (since Nov. 1985); UNRISD, UNU
USP Alafua Campus Library, Samoa: FAO since 1982
USP Emalus Campus Library, Vanuatu: ODS and UN Treaty System (Since Dec. 2000)
Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Library (Vaini Research Station), Tonga: FAO (since 1993)
Agriculture Library (Totokoitu Research Station), Cook Islands: FAO (since 1994)
Nelson Memorial Public Library, Samoa: UN (since 1949), Unesco
Reserve Bank of Vanuatu: World Bank (since November 1985)
National Library Services, Solomon Islands: ILO

We note that depository libraries can now choose to substitute electronic access for printed copies of UN publications. As we have space problems this option appears very attractive. However, we are also mindful of the fact that electronic access is still very limited in the Pacific with very few libraries in the region having the capacity to use the technology, and that the majority of our users do not have access to the technology as yet.

The UN System through various programmes such as UNDP has been very pro-active in helping developing countries maximise the benefits of ICT to "leapfrog" into the information age, and has been working in areas such as public policy reform, regulatory and network readiness, improvements in connectivity, and building human capacity. I am sure that the Dag Hammarskjold Library is also involved in these broad issues.

It can and should play a strategic role in mobilizing action to assist libraries in developing countries (not just the libraries belonging to the UN System) to pursue the opportunities and benefits offered by ICT.

As I have mentioned earlier, with the exception of a few, libraries in the Pacific are very poorly resourced and desperately need support to mitigate the wide information and digital divide that has developed.

USP Library would welcome a closer working relationship and partnership with the Dag Hammarskjold Library in bridging the information gap and achieving the ideal of universal access to information.