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# Strategic Planning for National Libraries in Developing Countries An Optimist's View\*

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**V**ARIOUS presentations on strategic planning for national libraries have been made in this IFLA forum but as far as I can ascertain, there has not been any which has treated the subject from the point of view of developing countries.

If we accept the definition by Steiner<sup>1</sup>, that «strategic planning is the process of determining the major objectives of an organization and the policies and strategies that will govern the acquisition, use and disposition of resources to achieve those objectives», then one can argue that this is not an activity that is likely to be affected by the location of the

institution in which it is done. But there are other considerations. For strategic planning is affected by three basic influences, namely: the fundamental socio-economic characteristic and purpose of the organization, the values and philosophy of management and the organization's strengths and weaknesses in the light of the external and internal environment.

Since these factors are likely to vary with different cultural, socio-economic and historical environments, then it is likely that the nature of strategic planning will be affected by the location of the organization.

In developing countries, the term national library can refer to widely differing organizations. They may include those libraries which display the basic characteristics identified by K. W. Humphreys<sup>2</sup> or they may also

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include organizations which are first and foremost public or academic libraries but which also perform some functions traditionally associated with national libraries.

In his paper «Strategic Planning in National Libraries» presented in Moscow last year, Maurice Line<sup>3</sup> considered the factors which make planning for national libraries different. He identified the following: «National Libraries are usually much more directly subject to government than other libraries.» Often resources may be suddenly reduced, drastically changing from year to year in an unpredictable manner and consequently they possess very little real autonomy.

The clientele of these libraries are less clearly defined than in other libraries. Consequently role determination is often done by governments rather than clients. National Libraries have «international relationships and responsibilities in a way that few other libraries do». They must therefore adhere to international standards. Being a «...part of the nation's total library and information system», they cannot operate in isolation, and their choice of functions and the way they are performed may be influenced by what other libraries do as much as what they do not.

Line concluded that «national libraries have therefore to plan under various pressures from government, often with reduced financial resources for an uncertain clientele

with a wide range of possible functions, and in the context of the rest of the nation's library and information activities». He described the process of planning in national libraries as being «different», and pointed out that under such conditions of great uncertainty one obvious answer is that planning was done «with great difficulty».

Line's assessment is very applicable to developing countries but in these countries the situation is even more complex because of the characteristics of the basic influences on the process of strategic planning itemized in paragraph two. Let us consider these and their effect on the planning process for national libraries in developing countries.

### **The Fundamental Socio-Economic Characteristic and Purpose of the Organization**

In developing countries more so than others, there is a strong contradiction in the fundamental socio-economic purpose of the national library. For quite often the primary functions pertaining to the acquisition and preservation of the nation's cultural records are subordinated to, or are in conflict with other functions particularly when as often happens, the national library doubles as an academic or public library.

Unless an organization can define its purpose precisely, it will lack a

clear understanding of its basic mission and have great difficulty in constructing a strategic plan. Even in countries where the national library does not double as an academic or public library there is some difficulty in maintaining a consistent definition of its purpose to enable strategic planning.

**For strategic planning is affected by three basic influences, namely: the fundamental socio-economic characteristic and purpose of the organization, the values and philosophy of management and the organization's strengths and weaknesses in the light of the external and internal environment.**

Uncertainty and change occur in all societies both developed and developing. However in the latter the future is far less predictable. Changes in government policy as political changes occur can make mockery of a carefully worked out strategic plan. Changes in economic circumstances also have this effect as well, as under pressure of the International Monetary Fund or other such funding agencies, many small developing countries have no real say in shaping their economic policies and are forced to adopt a policy of privatization, or institute drastic budget cuts in public sector entities

particularly where income earning capabilities are limited. In some countries the daily deterioration of the value of the local currency against other international currencies makes the situation even more unpredictable and unstable.

Even more perplexing and difficult, however, is the environment in which there is no clearly enunciated definition of the basic purpose of the library as happens in some countries. The library exists because it is established by the former colonial power and continues to exist as a symbol of modern society. However, no attempt has been made to redefine its role and function within the context of an independent nation seeking to achieve socio-economic growth. It therefore continues without direction in the absence of a clear mission statement. Where there is no clarity regarding the purpose, role and function of a national library it will be unlikely to be able to attract the resources required to perform effectively.

### **Management Values**

Management values here refer, not only to the attitudes and values of those who have direct responsibility for the library services, but also to those government policies which impact on the organization. The absence or presence of enabling legisla-

tion may hinder or promote effective planning, additionally the perception of the value of the library, on the part of government policy-makers, as reflected by the resources allocated for its operation will also have an impact.

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Where the philosophy of government as reflected by its policies, convey little recognition of the value of information resources in the society or little recognition of the role of the national library in facilitating access to information, then the strategic planning process may not be encouraged.

On the part of the managers of the library and information system, attitudes can also be of great significance. It may appear easier and far simpler for managers to practice «crisis management», reacting to problems as they arise in an environ-

ment where human, physical and financial resources are limited and there is a perception that planning will only lead to frustration.

Limited human resources may also influence management philosophy as in situations where there are very few professionals, the manager may believe that the rank and file staff can contribute very little to strategic planning within the organization. The likely result is that plans when developed will originate from the top with little or no participation by the staff and of course this will influence a lack of widespread commitment to the implementation of the plan on the part of such staff.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses in the Light of the External and Internal Environment**

#### *External environment*

Developing countries are characterized by poorly developed infrastructure for libraries and information work. There is little appreciation of the value of information as a resource and the economy is weak and struggling. In addition basic needs for housing, food, water, roads and educational facilities always take priority over libraries, both on the part of governments and policy makers as well as the population itself. In this kind of environment therefore, strategic planning for na-

tional libraries is not encouraged, nor is it perceived as being important, both by policy-makers in government and the population at large.

### *Internal environment*

The internal environment is equally discouraging. I have already mentioned the lack of trained staff, the poor infrastructure and limited financial resources. These together with inadequate data and information support for the planning process, all make it difficult for any meaningful strategic planning to take place. However, as the title of my paper suggests, I am an optimist and in spite of the difficulties and problems inherent in the situation in developing countries, I believe that there are benefits to be derived from strategic planning for national libraries in developing countries.

**Where there is no clarity regarding the purpose, role and function of a national library it will be unlikely to be able to attract the resources required to perform effectively.**

Strategic planning can create a vision of how the library can contribute to the advancement of the society and can influence the

decisions and actions which will shape the future of the library while prioritizing the allocation of limited resources in a manner which will enable it to meet the information needs of the community as effectively as possible.

The process of strategic planning, although difficult, time consuming and frustrating can secure far reaching benefits for developing countries.

### **Benefits**

What then are these benefits?

### *Identification of mission*

First would be the benefit to be derived from clearly enunciating the mission of the organization. Such a mission statement will provide a clear vision of the library's role in the society. Associated with the mission statement would be the goals identified which will provide clear directions as to future activities and identify priorities.

Identification of the national library's mission and goals could also serve to educate policy-makers as to the potential role of the library and the activities which it can perform in facilitating access to information which is a valuable resource in the transformation process in which these societies are involved.

### *Creating awareness*

Bearing in mind that any plan developed for the national library would have to be submitted to government for its approval and adoption, then an added benefit can be immediately seen, as the opportunity could be used as a public education exercise. The draft plan when distributed to government policy-makers, the advisory boards and to the community at large can be used to motivate persons to get involved by providing feedback and suggestions which could help to shape and define the role of the national library.

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Such discussions may result in modification of the mission statement, goals and plans but it would certainly ensure that the objectives of the library are in keeping with the overall objectives of government and that the needs of the society are identified so that the plans are developed to meet these needs.

### *Achieving consensus within information community*

Another benefit for developing countries is the effect which this could have in bringing the information community together. The national library should function as the chief focal point of the National Information System, providing leadership, while serving libraries as well as individuals. Plans when developed should be distributed widely throughout the library and information community to obtain input as to the functions which the national library should best perform in support of other libraries.

The strategic plan could therefore serve to mobilize the library community into taking a global look at library and information services provision within the country and help them to redefine the objectives of their library system, and to identify gaps, assign functions and put in place the institutions which are required to strengthen the infrastructure.

### *Management philosophy and attitudes*

Strategic planning if it is to be effective must involve widespread participation of the staff of the organization. This is necessary if there is to be commitment to the implementation of the plans which have been developed.

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Management philosophy is therefore another area which could benefit from the introduction of this process as management attitudes would have to change to become more accommodating in seeking the participation of staff in the development of plans.

#### *Staff training and development*

Participation in the planning process will have spinoff benefits for the staff as it will result in staff becoming more knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and increase their awareness about organizational matters. The process therefore becomes a staff training and development activity, facilitating a better understanding of the role of the library while helping individuals to clarify their position within the

organization and to identify the contribution which they can make towards achieving the objectives which they have helped to develop.

#### *Integration of plans*

The strategic planning process requires the formulation of measurable objectives, all directed towards achievements of the goals which have been identified. This demands integration of the plans for each division or department. All plans must be defined by a hierarchy of objectives which are geared towards the achievement of the broad goal. The process therefore ensures unity of direction as each department defines the strategies, programmes and activities which will realize divisional or departmental goals as well as that of the organization.

#### *Evaluation and performance measures*

Definition of measurable objectives provides the outcome indicators or criteria which are essential in the evaluation process. These outcome indicators provide the performance measures for assessing how effectively plans developed have been implemented and the degree of success or failure achieved in realizing the organization's goals. For the manager, performance meas-

ures therefore become a valuable tool for monitoring and controlling the implementation of the plan.

**The lack of trained staff, the poor infrastructure and limited financial resources. Together with inadequate data and information support for the planning process, all make it difficult for any meaningful strategic planning to take place.**

#### *Improved management information system*

A valuable by-product of the strategic planning process is the improvements which it encourages in the collection, organization and use of data for decision making. Information and data originating within the organization as well as from outside must be collected, organized, analyzed and used, to identify trends and issues which will affect the organization. Such data will facilitate improved decision making enabling more precise identification of priorities and better allocation of resources. An effective management information system will therefore influence greater responsiveness to the local environment. In effect therefore strategic planning for national libraries in developing countries requires a great deal of effort, patience and commitment, not only

because of the difficulties associated with such planning for national libraries in general, but also due to the peculiar problems associated with developing countries.

The benefits can, however, be rewarding and should by far outweigh the difficulties encountered in the process. It can create an awareness and consensus on the role and function of the library at all levels of the society. It forces the organization to consciously design and shape its future and to identify priorities in the context of its resource capabilities. It ensures data collection and analysis for better decision making, defines the strategies, activities and tasks which are required to ensure the implementation of plans, assigns responsibility for these and provides the mechanism by which results can be monitored and evaluated. In fact effective strategic planning is one certain way of minimizing the effects of uncertainty and change on the fortunes of national libraries in developing countries.

**The process of strategic planning, although difficult, time consuming and frustrating can secure far reaching benefits for developing countries.**

#### **References**

- <sup>1</sup> George STEINER, *Top Management Planning*. New York, Macmillan, 1969.



<sup>2</sup> K. W. HUMPHREYS, «National Library Functions», *UNESCO Bulletin for Libraries*, 20 (4) 1966, pp. 158-169.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice B. LINE. «Strategic Planning in National Libraries». Paper presented at the 57th IFLA General Conference, 18-24 August, 1991 (IFLA Booklet 1: Document 94-NAT-2-E), pp. 4.

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