

FOREWORD

It gives me great pleasure to welcome the librarians of the world to South Africa to deliberate on the theme “Libraries for the Future: Progress, Development and Partnerships”.

This book is a comprehensive reflection of the current state of the library and information sector in South Africa and it makes for absorbing reading. Not only does its publication mark a major intellectual achievement coinciding with the conference, it also marks a significant moment in the development of our libraries – a turning point in our approach to the dissemination of information and knowledge to enable our people.

This conference occurs at an auspicious time for South African libraries. The government has identified public community libraries as a key sector for providing conditions under which the lives of our people can be improved.

Before 1994, under the apartheid and earlier successive colonial regimes, community libraries reflected the racialised stratifications and racist inequalities our country was subjected to. Public libraries existed to serve informational and leisure reading habits of a privileged, predominantly white middle class. This even extended to the architecture of the buildings, which were built on the assumption that books would be taken out to read at home where there was space, comfort and sufficient light. However, our developmental needs dictate that library buildings should provide spaces where students and people from disadvantaged backgrounds can read and learn on site, because many homes have neither space nor sufficient light.

The government will be investing more than R1 billion in community libraries over the next three financial years. Our aim is to transform public community libraries into centres in which a true reading culture can be nurtured, especially among the young.

We aim to develop lifelong reading habits so that a sense of social cohesion, critical thinking and democratic values can be stimulated. It is therefore crucial that we develop, enhance and promote writing, publishing and reading in our indigenous languages and stock our libraries with these books.

This will support our education system, not only in primary and high schools but also at university level. This will in turn strengthen the libraries in these sectors as well.

Another positive development is the construction of a new building in Pretoria for the National Library of South Africa. This will give the library the facilities to truly fulfil its role as the leading institution in our library and information system. This new building will be completed in 2008 – unfortunately too late for this conference – but I hope that this spirit of renewal will permeate the conference as a clear indication of our determination and optimism.

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