

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Sally L. Witbooi

Department of Library and Information Science

University of the Western Cape, Bellville

switbooi@uwc.ac.za

“Today the public library scene in South Africa is difficult to summarise. There are areas of neglect and pockets of excellence ...” (Lor et al., 2005:269).

1. INTRODUCTION

The statement above echoes the research findings of many library and information experts in South Africa, where the distribution of, access to and quality of the services rendered by the public libraries have been skewed by the inequalities of the previous system of apartheid.

Public libraries in South Africa have always been subjected to change and many challenges. A plethora of literature is available that attests to the many problems that beset public libraries and offer possible solutions and models of best practice.

This chapter will attempt to summarise the current developments in public libraries in South Africa, giving information from the professional literature of the last 15 years and news on this sector that featured in the local newspapers.

However, the author deemed it appropriate to give the reader an overview of public library conditions prior to 1994 to facilitate a deeper understanding of, and a better appreciation for current undertakings. Library and information services (LIS) surveys undertaken prior to and after 1994 will be mentioned, briefly contextualised and their findings stated with a view to showing trends, persisting problem areas and current efforts to address them.

2. LIS IN SOUTH AFRICA PRIOR TO 1994

Surveys on LIS in South Africa were undertaken on a regular basis before 1994, such as the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) of 1992. The reports of these surveys reflected the state of libraries at the time in the four provinces and highlighted the needs of the LIS sector. The statistics were used to highlight the problems faced by libraries to assist policy- and decision-makers as well as legislators in South Africa.

In this era public library provision was regarded as the primary responsibility of the local authorities, but the governance and funding were complicated as both provincial and municipal authorities were involved. There were ten “autonomous” or non-affiliated

public libraries in South Africa in the main city centres of Cape Town, Durban, East London, Germiston, Johannesburg, Pietermaritzburg, Port Elizabeth, Pretoria, Roodepoort and Springs. They derived their funding from municipal rates and revenues and were not attached to the provincial library services (NEPI, 1992:20).

“Affiliated” libraries were jointly administered by their local authority and the province to provide library materials to primarily white people in smaller towns and rural areas (NEPI, 1992:20; Hart, 1999:170; PICC, 2005:5). Assistance rendered by the provinces to the local authorities included financial grants, provision of materials and library stock, and professional and infrastructural support. The local authority was responsible for the recruitment of human resources and for remuneration.

Public libraries in South Africa were following the tradition of their colonial master, Britain. The libraries were unevenly distributed and access to them was aligned along racial lines. Initially, in the 1950s, it was a service available only to white people in smaller towns and villages; in the 1980s, libraries were opened to all South Africans.

Access to libraries was problematic due to geographical and economic barriers, such as distances travelled and the cost of reaching libraries. Library provision in the black townships, informal settlements and rural communities was less favourable than that for white urban areas. Although membership and access to public library facilities are no longer restricted by ethnicity, the distribution of these facilities remains uneven. The figures given in the table below illustrate the status quo in the four provinces of South Africa at the time.

Table 1: Public libraries per province before 1994

	Cape	Natal	Orange Free State	Transvaal	Total
CENTRES					
Libraries	412	166	109	276	963
Other	451	125	215	519	1310
Total	863	291	324	795	2273
MEMBERSHIP	1 349 354	700 145	338 627	1 100 484	3 488 610
CIRCULATION (Books)	30 222 068	12 487 464	5 414 804	26 767 650	74 891 986
BUDGET (Materials)	R22 292 850	R9 916 541	R6 198 000	R24 849 000	R63 256 391
BOOK STOCK	9 021 166	3 515 021	4 349 326	9 443 030	26 328 543
STAFF					
Public libraries	1685	735	445	1671	4536
Provincial libraries	262	153	100	206	721
Total	1947	888	545	1 87 [1877]*	5257

Source: *The Cape Librarian* (1994:9).

* Own correction in []

The “autonomous”, non-affiliated libraries are accounted for in the “Other” category under “Centres”, as well as depots in certain areas, especially peri-urban and rural areas.



The children's corner in the Sandown Public Library in Johannesburg.
(Courtesy of the Directorate of Library and Information Services, Gauteng)

Resource centres in South Africa emerged in the early 1980s as an alternative to the traditional public library, which was perceived as not rendering a relevant service in areas with active community and political lives (Daniels, 1994:34). These resource centres then became a haven for individuals and people from civic and other organisations to meet, strategise, exchange information and study. This single room (or set of rooms) contained books, periodicals, newspapers of mainly social and political nature, and audiovisual and printing equipment.

The national transformation process is seen as the main reason for the demise of the typical resource centre, as it “no longer required the parallel development of different ways of working, thinking and organising” (Daniels, 1994:35). It was proposed that resource centres be integrated into a single development with public libraries that would embrace the positive elements of both sectors to form a transformed, different whole. The issues of the day then were:

- the omission by oversight of libraries in the national debate on reconstruction and development;
- the unequal distribution of libraries; and
- the funding and governance of libraries.

A unified, coherent and coordinated nationwide LIS system was envisaged and proposed, along with a comprehensive National Library and Information Services Act that

would enact a new body, to be called the National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS).

3. LIS IN SOUTH AFRICA AFTER 1994

The surveys undertaken in South Africa since 1994 were the report of the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG, 1995); the Public and Community Libraries Inventory of South Africa (PaCLISA) (Van Helden & Lor, 2002); as well as the very latest one by the Centre for the Book (PICC, 2005) that focused on the public/community library sector.

3.1 The ACTAG report

This report forms Chapter 6 of a comprehensive research document of the Arts and Culture Task Group that was presented to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology in 1995. Inputs from the LIS profession and the views of many different forums on a national policy for arts, culture, libraries and information were gathered from January to June 1995.

Besides the main policy issues, other concerns of the LIS community were the yet unresolved departmental alignment of libraries, the governance of libraries and the funding of libraries. The report covered all types of libraries (national, special, academic, school and public), as well as other information agencies such as documentation centres, resource centres, archives and media centres.

The report proposed that public libraries should obtain funding from the national Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) for literacy projects and materials, adult basic education, the promotion of a reading culture and work with disadvantaged children and the youth.

The increased use of public libraries by learners was acknowledged. It was proposed that this need should be accommodated by providing study space in public libraries and by establishing learning centres or joint-use libraries in communities according to their needs. Funds for these endeavours were to come from the Department of Education.

3.2 The Public and Community Libraries Inventory of South Africa

PaCLISA was the result of a joint need expressed by the Print Industries Cluster Council (PICC) and the National Library of South Africa (NLSA) for an exhaustive descriptive listing of South African public/community libraries. The project was executed in two phases, in 2000–2001 and 2003–2004 respectively.

The aim of the inventory was to indicate the location of these public and community libraries in South Africa on a geographic information system (GIS). In addition, descriptive information on the size and composition of the library collections, the users and use patterns was also collected.

This project was described by the compilers as “not an unqualified success”, the chief reason being the dramatic restructuring of municipal authorities, with municipal boundary changes that resulted in the redistribution and reassigning of libraries to new municipal areas. The net effect was not only name changes, but also a disrupted flow of funding (Lor et al., 2005:270).



The distinctive architecture of the glass-fronted Msunduzi Municipal Library in Pietermaritzburg, sponsored in part by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

(Courtesy of the Directorate of Library Services, KwaZulu-Natal)

The main research instrument was a questionnaire, which was returned by 817 of the 1249 public and community libraries. The data gathering tool had to be redesigned, as many respondents found the questions difficult to answer. A Working Group on Public Library Statistics was established to draft a simpler data collection instrument, as the intention of PaCLISA was that the inventory should be kept up to date (De Jager & Nasimbeni, 2005:39). Reliable data were, however, obtained for questions related to the numbers of books in stock, registered users and loans (Van Helden & Lor, 2002) – the usual non-financial statistics kept by public librarians.

The findings revealed that it was not possible to analyse the data and to present national findings on the state of public and community libraries (Lor et al., 2005:273). The report did not differentiate between public and community libraries, as the distinction is not always clear – public libraries are increasingly using the name “community library” and are thereby signalling a new embodiment of the social engagement of the public library.

Public libraries are still mainly serving the educated and urban middle class, which is a small minority of the population – less than 10 per cent, according to Van Helden and Lor (2002).

3.3 Funding and governance of public libraries in South Africa

This research project, commissioned by the Working Group on Libraries of the PICC in mid-2004, was executed by the Centre for the Book. It focused on the funding of public libraries in the nine provinces, particularly the expenditure on the acquisition of books.

The report found that the number of libraries per province is not proportional to the size of the population. For example, in 2004 the most populous province, KwaZulu-Natal, had fewer libraries (164) than two other provinces: Gauteng (516) and the Western Cape (307). The situation thus still prevails (see Table 1). The table below summarises data on the distribution of provincial libraries (PICC, 2005:27).

Table 2: Public libraries per province after 1994

	EC(1)	FS	GT	KZ	LM	MP	NC	NW	WC	Total*
2002	121	136	503	160	37	130		82	317	1486
2003	101	137	513	163	39	130		86	307	1476
2004	110	137	516	164	43	134		92	307	1503

*The total column is the author's own insertion.

This particular table in the report has no figures for the Northern Cape, but in another table (PICC, 2005:26), 102 libraries are listed for this province. The PaCLISA directory (Van Helden & Lor, 2002:8) indicated 101 libraries for this province.

The PICC report cautions one not to make comparisons, as the numbers given for the different provinces do not all cover the same type of institutions. For example, the 516 libraries for Gauteng include community libraries, community library depots, libraries in depots such as prison libraries, as well as non-governmental libraries, whereas the figures for the Free State only cover public libraries. These statistics show how the number of libraries in some provinces has decreased (e.g. the Eastern and Western Cape) and increased in other provinces.

Decreases were due to the closure of depots, expansion of boundaries and rationalisation – such as merging two previously “apartheid libraries” into “a proper one” (PICC, 2005:27). Increases were attributed to building programmes for new libraries and the expansion of services, especially in rural areas.

The LIS sector seems to be seriously affected by the continuous transformation since 1994 in its attempts to address issues of equal access to library and information sources, departmental alignment, governance, funding and human resources. This leaves libraries in a state of flux and staff with low morale. The inadequate staffing of public libraries is a further contributory factor to the low staff morale.

Societal problems impacting negatively on South African public libraries are the high levels of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment (Nassimbeni & May, 2006:29–31). In

1 Eastern Cape (EC), Free State (FS), Gauteng (GT), KwaZulu-Natal (KZ), Limpopo (LM), Mpumalanga (MP), Northern Cape (NC), North-West (NW) and Western Cape (WC).

areas where these conditions prevail, public library services are either non-existent (Witbooi, 2006b) or of a poor quality (Leach, 1998). Community members and organisations then take the lead to establish library facilities in rural areas (Aitchison, 2006).

South African public libraries are experiencing shrinking budgets, limited resources, increased demands and low membership profiles. Services in historically black townships are heavily used by learners in the afternoons for school projects, but very seldom by adults (Hart, 2007). The last decade has witnessed a general deterioration in public library service due to financial constraints (Leach, 2006:131; Bro, 2005).

4. CURRENT PROJECTS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 2005, the South African government announced that R1 billion (R1 000 000 000) would be allocated to public libraries over three years to upgrade, improve and expand this sector, on the precondition that comprehensive research into the sector is undertaken. This research will focus on the number and size of libraries in each municipality, their user statistics, human resources and collections, the demographics of each local authority, as well as the funding of the municipal libraries.

KPMG Services (Pty) Ltd and Jacaranda Intellectual Property Business Consultants were awarded the tender to develop a funding model for public and community libraries in three phases. Phase 1 would be an impact assessment study in all nine provinces; Phase 2 would be a status report and the creation of a funding model; and Phase 3 would be a plan of action that would detail expenditure focus areas.

The first phase of the tender has been completed and reports on the key findings and recommendations to the Department of Arts and Culture on how to allocate the initial R200 million made available by the Treasury for the 2007/8 fiscal year. The three key findings corroborated problems that were previously raised:

- The most urgent areas in need of funding are library materials, information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, personnel and human resource training (at both library and provincial level), technical services, and the maintenance of buildings and equipment.
- There is lack of clarity in many provinces about who has the legal mandate for providing, and thus financing, public and community library services.
- There is a fear that municipalities, which are under serious financial pressure generally, might utilise the additional funding in other areas they see as more pressing.

The project team recommends that:

- this funding for the 2007/8 fiscal year be made available as a conditional grant to ensure it is used for the intended purpose;
- between R15 million and R30 million be allocated to each province, totalling R200 million; and
- each province be given some discretion to spend its allocation based on its unique circumstances (such as demographics, size of geographical area, operating structure, etc.) (KPMG & Jacaranda, 2006:1).

The report of Phase 2 was to be tabled at the end of May 2007.



The new 500 square metre Nongoma Library in rural KwaZulu-Natal, which opened in 2006, was for many years housed in a single room.

(Courtesy of the Directorate of Library Services, KwaZulu-Natal)

Following in the footsteps of the national government, the provincial authorities, as in the case of the Western Cape, pledged R9.3 million in 2007 towards the alleviation of the dire shortage of librarians. This money will be utilised to appoint 40 to 50 staff in the Western Cape on three-year contracts as from July 2007 (Dentlinger, 2007:4). Although this is a huge contribution by this local government, it unfortunately amounts to little as only contract appointments can be made and personnel currently employed on contract will apply for the three-year positions. The staff figures thus remain the same, leaving the shortfall intact. The City of Cape Town authorities will have to fill the vacancies for permanent positions from their own budget.

The uncertainty about a clear definition of the relationship between municipalities and the Western Cape Provincial Library Service has impacted negatively on the provision of resources and has resulted in a reduction of service delivery (e.g. reduced opening hours and temporary closure of libraries when staff take their annual leave). The media have reported on these instances and thus raised public awareness of the woeful library scenario in the Western Cape (Breytenbach, 2006; News24.com, 2005; Ndenze, 2006; Nel, 2005).

Influential and wealthy individual South Africans are investing monetary resources to save the ailing public library services and ameliorate the effects of the overall deteriorating position of public libraries. An example of such philanthropic measures is the donation of R12 million by Mark Shuttleworth for the upgrading of the two libraries in Durbanville (Witbooi, 2006a:4).

Public libraries offer various services in conjunction with other partners to empower communities, especially the so-called “corners”, such as the Library Business Corners in the Western Cape. This project provides suitable small business and entrepreneurial material (usually in a corner space in the public library) to complement the business information collection in the public library.

Similarly, in the Free State, Government Information Services Corners, Community Information Services Corners, Business Information Services Corners, and Literacy Corners (containing repackaged information for neo-literates and adult basic education and training practitioners) are developed and tailor-made for libraries by the provincial head office. These services are expanding annually, with toy libraries installed in all new libraries and phased in at one existing library per year. The Phuthaditjhaba Public Library was declared an Official Publications Depository and opened in March 2006. Botshabelo is in the pipeline for a similar status change (Free State Libraries, 2007).

The Western Cape Provincial Library Service (2006:10) boasts of being “the most comprehensive library service in South Africa”. It has a total of 305 library centres serving a population of 4 465 600 people, with new facilities and upgrading in the pipeline for three district projects (which explains the difference in the total of 307 in Table 2 above).

The above-mentioned positive initiatives of central and provincial governments, together with the outcries of communities, services providers and the goodwill of individuals, signal that book lovers, readers and concerned citizens are all joining hands to resurrect our public libraries. Amid all the doom and gloom, there does seem to be hope for the South African public library sector.

It will be an ongoing challenge for LIS professionals in South Africa to work with the government and their communities to ensure that the pledged funds are utilised for the intended purposes. They should ensure that all South Africans have easy and free access to reading material in the language of their choice and relevant to their information needs and interests, thus giving impetus to the guiding principles of the UNESCO Manifesto to which South African public libraries have ascribed (Forsyth, 2005:315).

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