

# NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES (NCLIS)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS) resulted from a long history of library and information services (LIS) policy initiatives in South Africa. These initiatives gained momentum during the 1990s to address the continuous challenge of improving access to information for all South African communities. These and related issues were addressed by several advisory councils since 1990, including the:

- Library and Information Services Research Group of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), a project of the National Education Coordinating Committee in 1991–1992;
- LIS Task Team of the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) in 1993–1994;
- Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) appointed by the then Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) in 1994–1995; and
- Interministerial Working Group (IWG) on the Library and Information Services Function (National Level) in 1996–1997.

It is the work and recommendations of the IWG on library and information services building upon the work of the previous advisory councils listed above that laid the legal foundation for the creation of the NCLIS and presented the mandate for its functions. The IWG, consisting of academics and other experts in LIS, was appointed by the then Minister of the DACST and the Minister of Education specifically to advise them on (IWG, 1997:7):

... the mechanisms to ensure good governance of the library and information services system at the national level in South Africa, and to facilitate maximum availability and use of all relevant information sources to advance the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

## 2. THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL COUNCIL

The mission of the provincial library services in South Africa has been to raise the quality

of life of all citizens by enabling library authorities to provide public library services to the various communities (Stilwell, 1995:54). The reality on the ground, however, is that the majority of South Africans, especially those living in rural communities, still do not have access to LIS as envisioned by the government.

Historically, library services in this country have been characterised by fragmentation of information provision to a mainly academic, business and scientific user group on the one hand, and rudimentary or non-existent library provision to the majority of the population on the other hand. The services are stratified along the lines of race, class and urbanisation. As the majority of South Africans live in rural communities, it is imperative that these areas be developed if the country is serious about, and committed to a truly democratic and informed citizenry.

The conclusion of an article prepared by Professors Kaniki and Vermeulen (1997:36) for the report of the IWG (1997:40) represents the sentiments and ethos of what the NCLIS had to understand in order to carry out its mandate:

It is obvious that, with the disparities in the development of the rural sector of South Africa, there must be a national drive towards the development of rural information services in order to avoid widening the gap between the rural information poor and the urban information rich. While the provincial authorities have a right to develop their own rural areas, the development of rural information services will be accelerated if guided at the national level. Proper mechanics in the relationship between the national and provincial governance would need to be in line with the whole LIS sector.

The NCLIS was established in terms of the National Council for Library and Information Services Act (South Africa, 2001) and was inaugurated on 11 March 2004 in Cape Town.

### 3. OBJECTIVES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE COUNCIL

The Act sets out the aims and objectives of the NCLIS as being to advise the Minister of the DACST and the Minister of Education on matters relating to LIS in order to:

- support and stimulate the socio-economic, educational, cultural, recreational, scientific research, technological and information development of all communities in the country; and
- provide optimal access to relevant information to every person in an economic and cost-effective manner.

The NCLIS must inform and advise the Ministers on the following:

- the development and coordination of library and information services;
- the promotion of cooperation among LIS;
- legislation affecting LIS;
- policies, principles and criteria that should govern the allocation of public funds for LIS;

- existing adequacies and deficiencies of library and information resources, including literature in African languages and services;
- the effectiveness of education and training in library and information science;
- service priorities, after consultation with any organ of state responsible for LIS and other interested parties;
- the promotion of basic and functional literacy, information literacy and a culture of reading;
- ways in which new information and communication technologies should be harnessed to achieve improved integration, equity, cost-effectiveness and quality in LIS; and
- any other matter relating to LIS which the Council deems necessary, or which any of the Ministers may refer to the Council.

In addition, the Act stipulates that the NCLIS must:

- coordinate the response of the LIS sector to LIS matters;
- liaise and develop synergy with other bodies and councils regarding LIS matters;
- play an advocacy role in LIS matters; and
- investigate incentives for donations to libraries.



Hlabisa Public Library in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal.  
(Courtesy of the Directorate of Library Services, KwaZulu-Natal)

#### 4. COMPOSITION AND COMMITTEES OF THE COUNCIL

The NCLIS consists of 12 members appointed by the Minister of Arts and Culture on the basis of their expertise and/or special insight into LIS matters and the management, leadership and economics of LIS.

The Council is broadly representative of all sectors in the LIS field. It is constituted in a manner that takes account of gender, disability and historically disadvantaged persons, and ensures a spread of expertise and experience with regard to national, provincial and local interests; the role of information in society; and research, development and education in LIS.

Additional (non-voting) members include one official of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), one official of the Department of Education, the National Librarian, and one representative of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA). The chairperson is appointed by the Minister and the vice-chairperson is elected by the Council at its first meeting. Members are appointed for a term of three years.

At the first (inaugural) meeting of the NCLIS in March 2004, the vice-chairperson was elected and a strategic planning workshop scheduled for 22 May 2004. Here the vision, mission and strategic goals of the NCLIS were formulated and these working committees were formed according to the stipulations of the Act:

- Executive Committee, with the specific mandate to identify critical partners, address legislative deficiencies in the LIS sector, and source funding;
- Information Awareness Committee, in charge of the communication strategy of the Council;
- Education and Training Committee, responsible for education and training of LIS workers, education and training programmes, skills audit, the establishment of norms and standards, etc.; and
- Marketing Committee.

The committee structure is supported by the secretariat from the DAC, but has no implementation or executive unit in charge of implementing the decisions of the Council. At present, there is no specific physical facility or offices where the work of the NCLIS is carried out. Whilst the NCLIS embarked on an ambitious programme of action, it soon became very clear that in its current form (even with the excellent committees it had put together) and given the limited budget allocated to its work without an implementation unit, the Council had started off on a disadvantaged footing.

The Council would hold its meetings and make plans, yet fall short of implementing them in an effective manner. In some cases, it was able to source the necessary expertise to get a number of projects off the ground. However, the day-to-day running of the business of the Council still needs to be investigated and proposals made for a fully-fledged structure with staff to implement its plans along the lines of other public entities with executive authority. The NCLIS has recommended that the Minister reconsider changing the status of the Council from that of an advisory body to an executive one, to allow for the implementation of its decisions in line with other national councils and boards. This matter is currently under review by the DAC.

In spite of this drawback a great deal has been accomplished (as indicated in the section below) in the short three years of the Council's term of office, which ended in September 2006.

## 5. STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The vision of the NCLIS is "to position South Africa as the best informed nation". Its mission is to "provide strategic leadership and advocacy for literacy, a culture of reading and writing, innovation and open access to information".

Key strategic concerns are to raise government and public awareness of LIS matters; encourage synergy among stakeholders and strategic partners; address legislative deficiencies in the current LIS sector; improve funding of the LIS sector; and provide education, training and skills development of LIS human resources.

Key activities of the NCLIS from 2004 to 2006 were the following:

- The NCLIS inauguration and first meeting were held at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town on 11 March 2004.
- A strategic planning workshop was held in Pretoria on 20–21 May 2004.
- A value statement workshop was held in Durban on 28 October 2004.
- Presentations were made at the LIASA conferences of 2004 and 2005, the National Heritage Council Transformation Indaba in Durban, and the DAC Parliamentary Portfolio Committee in 2005.
- The DAC and NCLIS jointly hosted two symposia on the cost of a culture of reading, one in Cape Town in September 2004 and the other in Port Elizabeth in January 2005, with the latter focusing more on blind and print-handicapped readers.
- A consultative workshop on the review of national LIS, archives and heraldry legislation and related legislation was hosted jointly by the DAC and NCLIS in Cape Town in June 2005.
- During 2005 and 2006, the chairperson of the NCLIS, Professor Seth Manaka, addressed the Technical Committee on Arts and Culture, the Provincial Members of the Executive Council, the Select Committee on Education and Recreation, LIASA, and the Heads of the Provincial Library and Information Services.
- Both the chairperson and vice-chairperson of the NCLIS were involved in the tender process to appoint the company charged with the responsibility to develop a funding model for community and public libraries (Kekana, 1997).

Through these activities, the Council has been able to accomplish these outcomes:

- The vision and mission of the NCLIS provides a specific direction and compelling niche for the work of the Council.
- Through the consultative process it has galvanised synergy and brought together all stakeholders working towards the development of an informed South African citizenry.
- The NCLIS has created a platform for national conversation around the issue of a culture of reading and has made recommendations to the Minister regarding the legislative and policy framework conducive to developing the South African information society.

The greatest outcome of the Council's activities thus far has been the funding of community and public library projects, and the subsequent study on the development of the funding model that is being administered by the DAC.



The spacious and inviting interior of Trevor Barlow Library in Bloemfontein, which was completely renovated and computerised in 1999.

(Courtesy of the Directorate of Information Services and Heritage, Free State)

## 6. CHALLENGES FACING THE NCLIS

In its infancy, the NCLIS faced many challenges that threatened the success of its work. To begin with, members had to work through their collective understanding and conceptualisation of the work they needed to do, given their different backgrounds and expectations. On the other hand, the LIS community saw the Council as a body appointed to lobby the government about their bread-and-butter issues, including the closing of public libraries, the salaries of LIS workers, provision of LIS in the rural communities, and other issues.

These pressing matters had been on the agenda of the LIS community for a long time and, understandably, they were impatient to see when the issues would be addressed to their satisfaction. Some members of the Council saw their role as that of constituency representatives who would lobby the NCLIS on behalf of those interests. This exercise in clarity on roles took a considerable amount of time to carry out.

In the meantime, there were structural issues to iron out, one being the fact that the Council had only committees and the secretariat to work with, but no executive office to implement its decisions. The funding made available for its work did not take into

consideration the projects that needed to be undertaken and the expertise that needed to be sourced.

The debate on, and call for, a national council was historically housed and hosted by the Ministry of Education, where national LIS had a home. At the time of the promulgation of the Act, the DAC was still part of the Department of Science and Technology and under one Minister. By the time the Council was launched, the DAC was separated from the said Department.

In order to capture the original thinking that gave rise to the Council, all three Ministries needed to participate equally in its work. (The Minister of Education has a representative on the Council, whereas the Minister of Science and Technology still needs to appoint a representative.) This three-legged representation by government departments is crucial to the information society issues addressed by the Council: education, technology, arts and culture.

The three-year term of office for the first Council proved to be very short, as there was much to be accomplished. In essence, planning took most of the first year before any implementation was seriously off the ground. Just as the identified and approved projects were taking shape, the term ended and the DAC was not ready to have a second Council on board in time to continue with the work. At the time of writing, the second Council had not yet been announced.

Additionally, the following issues were identified and confirmed by the consultative process as key challenges to the work of the NCLIS.

### **6.1 Constitutional problems**

Although public libraries are the exclusive charge of provincial governments, the funding mechanism is a serious problem due to legislative deficiencies in the funding role of these governments with regard to public and community library services. Until Schedule 5 of the Constitution is amended, provision of funding to public and community libraries will remain a challenge.

### **6.2 Funding**

Funding continues to be a problem even with the recent injection of R1 billion into public and community library development. These funds are for a three-year period and additional funding might be made available, depending on how the initial funds are appropriated. The funding model developed by KPMG will hopefully alleviate this concern and provide a strong foundation for continuous support from the National Treasury in this regard. Issues extend to the funding of school libraries and provision of LIS for blind students.

### **6.3 Norms and standards**

The development of public libraries for the majority of South Africans had been so neglected by the previous regime that the need for norms and standards in terms of quality library services, staff and funding remains dire. The NCLIS understands its task to facilitate this process and establish standards and norms for provinces in partnership with local government bodies.

#### 6.4 Skills development, career opportunities and remuneration of LIS sector workers

This issue was at the top of the agenda of the consultative workshop, indicating the threat and risk that this matter is presenting to the work of the NCLIS in assisting South Africa to become an informed nation.

#### 6.5 LIS transformation charter

This charter is seen as a transformation vehicle for the LIS sector. The debates and workshops on the charter have begun, and it is hoped that the incoming Council will continue to develop and finally craft a charter that forges ahead the transformation of LIS.

### 7. THE FUTURE OF THE NCLIS

The term of office of the first Council expired in September 2006. A call for nominations for the new Council was published in October 2006, and at the time of writing, the process of appointments had not yet been finalised by the Minister of Arts and Culture. The new term of office is from 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2010.

The first Council laid the foundation for its work as outlined in the NCLIS Act. It has grappled with issues of common understanding and visioning among its members and stakeholder groups, and has managed to create a platform for engagement and synergy. The communication channels between the Council and the Ministers of Arts and Culture and Education are open and receptive, and the Council has enjoyed the audience and support of the Portfolio Committee of Arts, Culture and Sports. The R1 billion grant from the Treasury for the development of community and public libraries is a case in point.

The strategic imperatives identified by the first Council are still relevant and timely and need to form a critical part of the work of the incoming Council. These include:

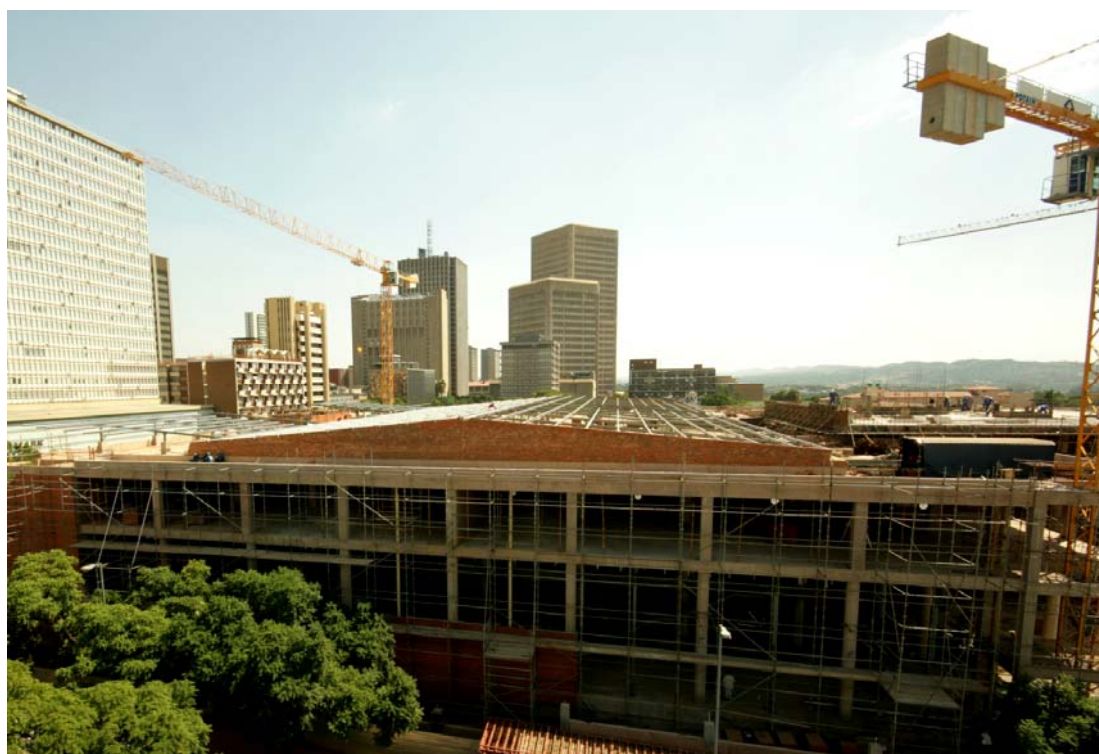
- the need for an implementation unit for the NCLIS;
- finalisation of the transformation charter process;
- legislative deficiencies in the current LIS sector;
- funding of LIS;
- education, training and skills development;
- greater focus on school libraries; and
- the continuous need to raise government and public awareness of LIS matters.

The second Council will have to carry the baton and move the work of the NCLIS towards a stage of consolidation by taking advantage of the prevailing conducive environment and synergy.

Although the NCLIS in its current form may look very different from the original vision developed in the early 1990s, it is nonetheless a “victory for those who believe that government has a vital role to play in delivering LIS and access to information to South African communities at every level” (Walker, 2004:14).

In her capacity as the Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Ms Buyelwa Sonjica addressed the inaugural meeting of the NCLIS as follows (Sonjica, 2004):

We will all recall how important the sharing of information during the struggle years was and how precious information is to sustaining human rights ... Libraries play a vital role in the freedom of information environment, especially in a developmental sense. Democracy can only be sustained by providing access to all the information necessary for our citizens to take informed decisions ... LIS in South Africa should be revitalised from the bottom up, with the Council steering and coordinating new ideas and initiatives for restructuring the LIS sector.



Construction of the large new building of the National Library of South Africa in the city centre in Pretoria, only a block away from the old building.

(Courtesy of the NLSA and Jeremy Malan Architects and Interiors)

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