LIWO: Local Touch and Global Networking in South Africa

by Johnny Jacobs

A Long Road To Freedom

The need to establish an “alternative” library association in South Africa was felt strongly and simultaneously in various parts of South Africa as well as from the international library fraternity. Today I salute all LIWO supporters within the ALA. I also need to pause and pay tribute to the relentless efforts of our stalwarts Philip van Zijl who emigrated to New Zealand, and Vincent Kolbe retired public librarian. Here I need to mention the name of Christian Ziervogel, the first black librarian in South Africa. This ignites yet another untouched issue, namely the rewriting of our library history in South Africa. The right thing to do is a truth and reconciliation investigation.

The establishment of the United Democratic Movement during the eighties as well as “the partial collapse of authoritarianism in civic life” created an opportune moment to launch an alternative library association. The need to oppose and “counter-balance” the South African Institute of Library and Information Science (SAILIS) as the official mouthpiece of librarianship in South Africa was critical for the democratic process of redress and transformation.

Get Up and Be Counted

In July 1990, the Library and Information Workers Organization (LIWO) was launched in Durban. The keynote address was delivered by Barbara Masekela, the present South African Ambassador in France. LIWO aligned itself with the Mass Democratic Movement rather than to a particular political party.

In November 1990, a LIWO branch was launched in Pietermaritzburg. LIWO-Western Cape was launched in October 1991 and, in November 1994, LIWO-Gauteng was launched. Each LIWO branch existed as an independent, autonomous organization with its own constitution.

LIWO started its own quarterly newsletter “LIWOLET” to inform members about the organization as well as comment on professional issues which were under-reported. LIWO’s energies were directed towards specific issues: a series of fact sheets dealing with censorship have been published, and LIWO-Pietermaritzburg conducted a survey to highlight the inequities in library service delivery, which led to the Open Libraries Project. Local authorities, within Kwa Zulu Natal, who were guilty of limiting access to libraries were confronted by LIWO-Durban and the Legal Resource Centre.

LIWO-Western Cape published an audit of library service delivery within the Greater Cape Town Area. These studies revealed the gross inequities in the provision of library facilities that existed under the apartheid regime. The involvement of LIWO members in the National Education Policy investigation regarding policy options for redressing the imbalances in library service delivery kindled the empowerment of library and informa-
tion workers to take control of their own destiny.

In 1993, LIWO campaigned vigorously for democratic selection of library and information workers to serve on the library sub-committee of the Centre for Educational Policy Development (CEPD). This was an ANC commissioned investigation into educational policy. The presence of LIWO members in the CEPD process was noteworthy. The need for further participation and consultative library research led to the launching in 1993 of Transforming Our Library and Information Services (TRANS LIS). TRANS LIS provided a platform for the first time for members of the three library associations to debate issues of mutual concern. TRANS LIS changed its status from a coalition to a forum. I believe the self interest of certain individuals, coupled with the fear of domination, led to the abortion of TRANS LIS.

LIWO National Conference 1995

This conference was financially supported by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) through the intervention of Bibliotek iSamhalle (BiS). This was the beginning of our global reach and joint partnership that is presently still flourishing. The aim of the conference was to define and clarify LIWO’s position with regard to its national structure, its vision and its relationship to the national library issues.

In her keynote address, Maria Farelo critiqued the organizational structure of LIWO and presented some instructive indicators as to a future action plan for LIWO. A resolution was passed to unify LIWO into one national structure in order to speak with one voice and to facilitate ease of communication and decision making within LIWO.

On the unification of the three library organizations, Colin Darch presented the following analogy: “if a shark swallows a sardine, are they united?” A clear distinction between unification and unity is needed. The latter is defined as “the holding of broadly similar social and political viewpoints by most or all of a defined population (in this case the community of LIS practitioners)” while the former is defined as “an administrative union of two or more separate organizations.”

The fact that LIWO and SAlLIS are politically divergent LIS organizations underscores the “disagreement over what LIS practitioners really do (especially how they do it) and over what LIS membership associations are supposed to be like.” The differences in perspective and approaches are rooted in their social and political viewpoints. Apartheid is still alive and kicking. A quick-fix process towards unity will shipwreck the process of social transformation and redress while “the process towards unity could be protracted with a fairly long-term prospect that can only enhance social goodwill and prosperity for all.”

Christopher Merrett highlighted LIWO’s past, its present and its future. He pointed out that “a call for unity is one way in which to stifle creative dissidence and that in the new South Africa there was still a need for creative dissidence.” He concluded by saying, that “to strengthen democracy more dissenting voices are needed, rather than less.” He urged LIWO to remain one of those voices.

Chantelle Wyley “gave a stimulating talk on ‘people-centered’ developmental information services.” For a start, information should be brought to the people, the information needs of our communities should be determined, and people should be made aware of their information needs. “Information services, in relation to development will have to be considered given the resources, expertise, facilities and motivation, the way services are offered, how services are identified, implemented and assessed; because a mass of unsatisfied information needs exist at community level.”

The national conference was followed, in November 1995, by a further meeting of branch representative in order to ratify the resolutions of the conference and the mission statement, as well as to elect a national coordinating committee.

Focus of LIWO Mission Statement

“The Library and Information Workers’ Organization of South Africa (LIWO, S.A.) is an independent activist organization involved in social transformation. LIWO aims to provide the space for critical and constructive debate and projects, and to bring together LIS practitioners of all kinds in an organization working towards an equitable, non-discriminatory information system accessible to all the people in South Africa. It aims to provide a forum for the voiceless, the marginalized and non-conformist within a culture of human rights. In line with this progressive stance, LIWO’s base is the individual commitment of its membership.”

Progressive Librarian #15
“LIWO recognizes:
• the inalienable right of every person to participate in the free flow and equal exchange of information;
• the right of library and information workers to collect, store and distribute information freely and without interference;
• that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression and that this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers;
• that library and information services in South Africa have been distorted by apartheid in such a way that the information needs of the majority have not been satisfied and the imbalances need to be addressed;
• that the past policy of apartheid has marginalized and continues to marginalize certain sections of the library and information sector;
• the responsibility of the state for the provision of library and information services for all

“LIWO the watchdog will endeavor to:
• defend libraries against the outsourcing of information which conflicts with a public service ethos;
• will resist any form of prejudice in the selection, presentation and distribution of information;
• develop information services in response to community needs;
• promote research of library and information services;
• develop training programs for library and information workers;
• promote the usage of democratic practice in the work-place;
• campaign to eliminate all forms of discrimination in the LIS sector;
• initiate and foster communication between LIWO members and information workers both in South Africa and beyond its borders;
• network with all relevant structures that impact on LIS.”

LIWO adopted a unitary organisational structure. It comprises of branches and a National Co-ordinating Committee. The present National Co-ordinating Committee is: Acting National Co-ordinator; Communications/Media person; Projects person; Treasurer; and one representative from each province. Branches elect its own executive committees.

LIWO members have also attended International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) conferences in their individual capacities and were able to promote LIWO and its principles in various forums. In 1990 the picketing by LIWO delegates and supporters at the IFLA Conference in Stockholm highlighted the need for support for an anti-apartheid stand by IFLA. In 1991, Joseph Reilly, a member of the Progressive Librarians Guild (USA), read a LIWO statement entitled “South African Libraries in the De Klerk Era” to the Special Political Committee of the United Nations during its hearings on apartheid.

In 1993, the five-person delegation from IFLA to South Africa met with LIWO members in Cape Town and Durban. The IFLA fact-finding report resulting from this visit was not received with enthusiasm by LIWO.

In 1994, LIWO-Pietermaritzburg met a BiS delegation and secured financial support for the 2nd LIWO National Conference, and for the BiS/LIWO Libraries for Young Learners Project. This project was initiated by Lennart Wetmark of Bibliotek i Samhalle (BiS). A draft business plan was circulated to all LIWO branches and the document was workshopped. In 1996, LIWO’s National Coordinating Committee approved the project. Approval was also sought from the National Education Department. Cathy Stadler of Information Management and Communication was appointed to oversee the implementation of the project. Funding was transferred from the general LIWO account to the LIWO Libraries for Young Learners Project account. BiS also secured additional funding for the project from SIDA.

In September 1997, a group of Provincial Heads of School Library Departments and a representative from the Department of National Education undertook the first field trip to Sweden. The aim of the visit was to expose
the group to “best practices” models in Sweden in order “to stimulate ideas about what would work in South of Africa.” The group also had to determine the selection criteria for the second phase of the project. This was the exchange trip to Sweden in 1998 of a group of 18 librarians. The selection criteria for this trip was further debated in South Africa to allow the various provincial education departments to nominate suitable candidates based on their specific needs. The pairing of a media advisor with a librarian from the same school circuit was considered the best option.

In February 1998, five representatives of BiS visited South Africa to interview the 18 applicants and to evaluate the project. In May 1998, the 18 librarians visited Sweden. The LIWO Libraries for Young Learners Project Committee had a tele-conference on 28 May 1998 to discuss the outcome of the recent visit and to plan the way forward.

LIWO is presently in the process of establishing another branch in the Northern Cape Province. I do have a business plan for the Northern Cape Libraries - Upington Region. The Northern Cape Province has the second highest illiteracy rate in South Africa. There is a dire need for financial support to facilitate literacy projects, as well as to purchases library material such as books, videos and CD’s.

Conclusion

LIWO started as an organization with a local touch. This has empowered barefoot library and information workers. The scene has been set for a global reach. The partnership between BiS and LIWO has broadened our understanding and we have learned from each other.

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FROM STUDENT REVOLT TO WORKING LIBRARIANS: The Formation of BiS, Sweden by Lennart Wettmark

BiS was founded in 1969 by students of the then-only library school in Sweden, and new members were added each year from new students. A very specific generation was formed in those years and has continued to be the core of BiS. You can actually say that new members and most of all new activists – on the whole – ceased coming in by the end of the 1970s. This might seem like a very sad story and it is to a certain extent. By now we have stopped asking ourselves about the new generation which is supposed to follow. Instead we’re working along on basically the same concept, since that’s the concept which has formed our generation’s intellectual and political life. There has of course been shifts from a more rhetorical to practical approach. After all most of us have by now been working for 25 years in the system.

Socialist Platform

Some people might ask us why we’re labelled “socialist.” This is no longer a big problem. In 1970 it was felt that BiS had become too popular and a big majority felt that BiS should be more politically explicit. BiS accepted a socialist platform. There was a lot of discussion about that decision during the 1970s; some people would rather see a sort of united progressive front using the concept “People.” But we believe that the fact that BiS actually has survived is due to the common ground of socialist values – consciously not very clearly defined, but rather of an ecumenical kind, attracting a wide range of left wing people.

The Transformation of the Library System

The formation of BiS actually took place in a period when the library system in Sweden – probably as elsewhere – was transformed from a rather