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The National Library of Benin and its user services

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INTRODUCTION

I am honoured and pleased to be able to present to participants in the 70th World Library and Information Conference a paper outlining the services to the public provided by the National Library of Benin, of which I am director since September 2001.

This paper will concentrate on two main points. First of all, I will briefly present the National Library of Benin, its creation, mission and infrastructure, then I shall describe the services provided to different parts of the population. I will conclude with some information on various projects we are studying that we hope will help to serve our public better.

I – THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

1.1. Creation

The National Library was set up in 1975 by the decree n° 75-308 of 28 November 1975.

1.2. Infrastructure

The library building was constructed in 1985. There are three main buildings: for administration (management and technical services); the public (reading rooms, conference rooms circulation, exhibition areas) and the stacks. Together the three buildings cover an area of 4'962 m², distributed as follows:

- Administration et technical services : 726 m²
- Public services : 1 736 m²
- Stacks or reserve rooms : 2 500 m²
- Ground floor : 1 215 m²
- And upper floor : 1 285 m² .

1.3. Mission

1.3.1 'Classic' missions

The National Library has the following main missions:

- The collection, conservation and distribution of all the country's published output in any form via legal deposit, acquisitions using the library's own budget and via donations and legacies,
- The regular publication of the Benin National Bibliography (**Bibliographie du Bénin**), which covers publications produced by Benin nationals in Benin or abroad, plus publications about Benin produced abroad,
- Bibliographic control via the national ISBN and ISSN centre.

1.3.2 Secondary Mission : acting as a public library

- And the promotion of books and reading through the decentralised regional libraries (Bibliothèques Départementales (BD)) and the Public Library Centres (Centres de Lecture Publique (CLP)).

1.4. Special collections

- Héritage de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN)

Over a thousand works covering Africa and Dahomey from the colonial period form the library's initial collection, inherited from the IFAN at its creation in 1975.

- Theses and dissertations

Over a thousand theses and dissertations presented in Benin, plus some theses from Beninese students abroad.

- Engravings, maps and plans

The Library has a good collection of maps and plans from different parts of the country

- Music heritage

In partnership with the Banque Internationale d'Information sur les Etats Francophones, the Library has received more than seven hundred cassettes and CDs of Beninese music.

II – SERVICES

2.1 Services common to all National Libraries

These are all the 'classic' services that are part of the Library's mission:

2.1.1 *Collection and conservation of the national published heritage*

2.1.2. Bibliographic control

2.2.1 National ISSN-ISBN centre

The National Library of Benin joined the International Standard Serials Number Centre (ISSN) in September 2000. The national ISBN-ISSN centre began to assign ISSNs in 2001 and thus manage national published output. Until now,

- 105 ISSNs have been assigned
- and dozens of ISBN 'blocks' have been assigned to publishers, printers and authors upon request.

2.2.2 Assignment of legal deposit numbers and the production of the national bibliography.

The published output in Benin is not sufficient to allow regular publication of the national bibliography at established intervals. Since the creation of the Library, 5 issues have been published, the fifth covering the period from 1996 to 2002, published in November 2003.

The low numbers of legal deposit numbers assigned is due to the limited national published output. Many Beninese continue to be published abroad, especially in France, despite the fact that there are several excellent and reputable publishers in Benin.

The first issue of the Beninese Music Bibliography (Discographie béninoise) is being prepared and will be published during 2004.

2.3 The National Library and the general public

The National Library is also mandated to promote reading and books. In addition to managing the 12 public libraries in the country's 12 departments (counties), the National Library provides a general reading service, made up of the following elements:

2.3.1 The lending centre

The lending centre enables users to borrow books from the National Library. These are not the documents about Benin that are for conservation but items specially acquired for the general public. The collection contains more than a thousand volumes for all tastes, for both teenagers and adults.

2.3.2 The children's section

The children's section was set up in 1998 with the help of Unicef and Unesco in response to the demand for reading material for the very young. Thousands of children from 0 to 14 years' old visit every year. In addition to providing reading material, the section helps children through many other activities including:

- book discussion groups,
- discussion on current topics of national and international interest (trafficking in children, the « vidomington » phenomenon or child 'fostering', etc.),

- workshops in the arts,
- video cassette showings and any other activity that will help children learn and complement the teaching received in school.

2.4 The National Library and the promotion of New technologies for Information and Communication (NTIC) : the access point to the inforoads for the young (Le point d'accès aux inforoutes pour les jeunes – PAJE)

In partnership with the Intergovernmental Agency for French-speaking countries (Agence Intergouvernementale pour la Francophonie - AIF), the National Library of Benin provides users with access to information via the Internet through its PAJE service

The PAJE service of Porto-Novo began as an AIF project for which the National Library received funding following a call for proposals launched by the Institut National des Technologies de l'Information et de la Formation (INTIF) for the creation and installation of Internet centres for the young in French-speaking countries. It opened officially on February 1st 2000 and was the first cybercafé in the town of Porto-Novo. The objective was to enable the young people of Porto-Novo to familiarise themselves with computers and the Internet. Since that date over 5000 people have used the centre and over 2000 young people and adults have been trained to use the word processing and spreadsheet programmes (WORD, EXCEL, etc.) while some have also learned how to set up Web pages.

Thanks to this centre, the National Library has been able to set up an annual Internet fair, which celebrated its fifth anniversary last March.

2.5 The National Library and indigenous knowledge transfer

In cooperation with artisans from the town of Proto-Novo, the National Library organises meetings to enable the transfer of indigenous knowledge. The emphasis is put on traditional crafts and trades that are beginning to disappear as well as on difficult crafts or those which do not interest young

people any more. These meetings help to perpetuate knowledge about crafts such as weaving or knowledge about traditional medicine.

2.6 The National Library and continuing education for the nation's managers

In cooperation with other state entities, the National Library offers training courses to civil servants plus meetings of national and international interest. Staff from both the public and private sector may use the library's premises for courses aimed at increasing efficiency, for international conferences etc.

2.7 The National Library and the encouragement of sport among the Beninese youth

In cooperation with sports clubs, the National Library makes its premises available to young people so that they can practise a variety of sports. Two karate and judo clubs and a table tennis club are among those who use the library's infrastructure.

2.8 The National Library and the promotion of excellence in the humanities in Africa

The National Library has temporarily made available part of its premises to Professeur HOUNTONDJI Paulin, a renowned Beninese philosopher so that he can set up the Centre Africain des Hautes Etudes which has been selected by the AIF as a centre of excellence for the humanities in Africa. The centre has a humanities library that provides the National Library with additional specialised documentation in this field.

2.9 The National Library and the promotion of Beninese art

The National Library promotes Beninese culture and artists. Exhibitions enable artists to promote their work and talent and make themselves known to a wider public.

Non-governmental organisations use the premises to bring together children from the ages of five to fifteen for cultural activities.

CONCLUSION

In Africa, national libraries are institutions that, in addition to their classic missions and objectives, must also carry out other activities to enable the population to capitalise on the libraries' resources. Those countries privileged to have a national library must find activities that reach all levels of the population. Thus the National Library of Benin plans henceforth to orient its activities towards areas that will benefit the largest part of the Beninese people.

Projects

- ***Expansion of the Internet centre to include a specialised collection in ITC and increase in the computing facilities***

The room in which the PAJEBN is currently located has become too small in relation to the number of users and the increasing goals and ambitions of the centre. It is therefore planned to expand the centre by adding more computers and other IT equipment and by moving to a larger room. Users request more and more frequently documentation relating to ITC so in response the centre has acquired documents in that field and wishes to make them available to the public.

- ***Partnership with the Porto-Novo museums***

It is hoped that young people will popularise the Porto-Novo culture via the Internet. The idea is that each museum would set up an Internet site on which information about Porto-Novo culture could be shared. Each museum could provide information on its exhibitions and teams of young people could help set up the site. It would also be interesting to train museum staff so that they could set up a site for their own institution.

- ***Cooperation with the Ethnography Museum in the Parcours project***

The *Parcours* project is an initiative of the association 'Ethnologues en Herbe' that aims to select and bring together the most appropriate ethnological collections and to encourage cooperation among the participating institutions. Within the project, the Ethnography museum in Porto-Novo will make an inventory of the elements of Beninese culture to be included on a Web page. The National Library will act as intermediary between the project initiators and the Museum, and will provide technological expertise for IT access, plus communication and printing services. The Library's hardware and telecommunications will make exchange of information easier and will also serve as the site for the content.

- ***« Project to improve female literacy via multimedia» with the Association Initiale***

This project has been proposed by the Association Initiale, based in Marseilles, and is planned to run in six countries in Africa (Benin, Cameroon, Comores, Gabon, Mali, Senegal) in order to carry out training in the area of literacy for women. A centre and equipment will be provided to the trainers. The centre could also help identify the target population that will take part in training, carry out recruitment, coordinate activities etc.

- ***Taking part in training to create Internet sites with Think Quest Africa***

In May 2004, 40 hours training (leading to a diploma) in the creation of Internet sites will be given to a certain number of users at PAJEBN. The training will enable participants to enter an international competition for Web page creation in which the PAJEBN is taking part.

- ***Possibility to provide training leading to a diploma and set up partnerships to create training periods for the students with various institutions in the region***

Steps are being taken to move from a simple introduction to IT towards a fully structured programme leading to a diploma. Within this context, the centre plans to cooperate more closely with various organisations and private companies in the region who could provide training periods for the students being trained at PAJEBN. Students could thus obtain practical experience and it would be possible to evaluate their progress on a concrete basis before they receive their diploma. This approach would also help newly trained young people to integrate the work place.

- ***Looking for opportunities for multilateral partnerships with international organisations***

The PAJEBN is always looking for opportunities to cooperate and establish partnerships with national and international organisations in order to obtain support for its activities and start new projects.

- ***Building a 'green theatre'***