68th IFLA Council and General Conference
August 18-24, 2002

The Ghana Project – from planning to operational phase
Special focus on some of the barriers in the project

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Introduction

Alfred Martey and I have been involved in the project since it started in Ghana in 1996.
In our presentation today we have agreed to present different approaches to the project.
Mr. Martey will focus on the benefit of the project and the experiences we have achieved so far with the Ghanaian libraries. I myself will give a short introduction to the idea behind the project, and I would like to comment on the project from the sponsor´s point of view, where I will apply a special focus on some of the barriers and problems we have faced during the project. This should, however, not be understood in the sense that we have different opinions on the project, about the benefits and the state of art of the project.

I shall not hide the fact that it has been a difficult project to handle, and the time schedule has been changed several times since we started. There have been several ups and downs –
However, I hope that our presentation today will give you an impression of a project where commitment, enthusiasm and engagement have shown that in spite of all problems we can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Background of the project

Ten years ago we discussed in the section of Document Delivery and Interlending the situation for the academic libraries in the third world countries. There had been several articles describing the hopeless financial situation for most of the libraries in main universities and how they were unable to buy even the

most necessary scholarly and scientific materials. At the same time access to - and the use of - electronic databases – primarily with bibliographic materials - but with document delivery services connected - was strongly developed in Europe and the United States. It was obvious that the gap between the information in rich societies in the western countries and in the third world countries were widened dramatically. Although some universities succeeded in getting sponsor support to buy books and journals in some areas, it was quite unrealistic for them to build an adequate collection of library material in this way. In our discussion of the situation we found that it would be a more realistic way to solve the information resource problems in the university by drawing on new information technology. Our idea was that money spent on facilitating access to electronic resources could result in a much better covering of the real information needs. We had an optimistic view where the introduction of access to electronic material would be a quantum jump in the service to students, teachers and researchers at the universities.

Everybody found that it was an excellent idea. We only needed to convince some of the traditional sponsors that money to support universities would be spent more effectively in this way. And we succeeded. Danida – the Danish International Development Assistance - found that the idea was interesting and was willing to support a trial project. They suggested Ghana because they were already involved in some research projects at Legon University in Accra.

Launching the project

I shall not bother you with details about the planning of the project, negotiations with different partners etc., but I will, of course, be happy to reply to your questions and comment upon it later on during the discussion. One thing was very important in this phase, the decision to consider the project as a trial project, where the experiences could be used in future sponsor projects.
During the project we have tried to be firm on that, but in practice it has been very difficult. I will comment on this later.

We started the project in 1996 – very optimistic and very naive – and I think this counts for both parties – the Danish project Group – and the Ghana Steering Committee.

It is not easy to make co-operation work across cultural differences, where the project managers have to struggle with practical problems, as well as bureaucratic and unstable communication systems, so we have learned our lesson.

First phase was a seminar where we met with representatives from universities and libraries and people from the communication sector. We presented the idea of the project and the new possibilities offered by the Internet, and we had a state of the art presentation of the situation in Ghana – especially for the communication area, where we found the situation very promising. We left the seminar with a feeling that the promising development in the communication area would make it easy for us to establish an electronic network and ensure access to information resources not only from the main university Legon in Accra, but also from the universities in other parts of the countries.
However, this was our first and very serious mistake. In reality we had to establish network solutions in most areas. As a matter of fact, since we started we have constantly had problems finding the right solutions for the communication systems and equipment for the participating libraries; partly because of problems with equipment, installations, lack of maintenance etc, partly because of the technological development which created new possibilities during the project period, but also as a consequence of the new possibilities of giving access to full text electronic material. There is no doubt about the importance and value of the PERI-programme, which Carol Priestley will inform us about, but it has created an immediate need for a higher communication capacity for the libraries, which has caused us some problems.

We also misjudged the knowledge of the staff members. We expected a basic competence in interlending work and a basic IT-knowledge somewhere in the library organization. This was not the case, and we had to use much more resources in training and education than expected.

As mentioned in my introduction I will now focus on some of the barriers. I will start with the most important ones: Firstly, the technical solution and secondly some merely personal considerations of the co-operation between the Danish project group and the libraries involved in the project.

Technique

We expected to build upon the telephone communication when we started the project, but we soon found out that it was not possible. There were great capacity problems, problems with liability, and in one library we discovered that they only had one telephone to cover all functions. If we had been a little more thorough in our preliminary research, this would not have been a surprise for us. To be able to handle all the technical problems we faced, we included a technical team in the Danish project group. The head of Centre of Tele Information at the Technical University in Denmark Professor Knud Erik Skouby took over the responsibility for the technical part. He was already involved in tele comminication projects in Ghana and familiar with the situation. Together with the technical experts we chose , we found that economical and feasible good solutions for each of the participating libraries, but different solutions, because we were interested in investigating different kind of communication systems as a part of the trial project concept. The enclosed scheme gives a short description of the technical solutions for the participating libraries as it looks today after several modifications.

We were very proud of the radio communication system, but we soon found out that libraries, supposed to use the system, did not share our enthusiasm. It is – I am afraid – a typical desk solution.
After installation of the radio links the technological development has given the participating libraries better and more reliable communication systems. The reason for our special interest in radio communication system is that it can be used in some areas, where the only alternative is a very expensive satellite communication system, but – to be honest – we still have to prove, that it is a feasible solution. And I hope that we will be able to do so before closing the project.

Except of Balme University Library none of the communication systems were functioning acceptably from the beginning. We have, however, had problems with all other installations. Some of the problems were ordinary communication problems such as lack of information about how the system functionated – especially in the first couple of years we had a lot of such problems. Sometimes we found out that a communication system had not been in use for weeks, but neither the technical expert in Ghana nor the Danish Project group had been informed. We also met with lack of basic technical competence in most of the libraries, which constantly caused problems, and although we achieved to build up a strong local technical team at Balme Library, it was difficult for them to overcome the support to all installations. Besides – We felt in the Danish project group that competence, conflicts between the technical team connected to Balme Library and libraries in other part of the country caused problems. So to conclude this part, our experience shows that is has been very difficult to get an actual overview about the situation, to get liable technical reports and to build up a system where the local technical expertise could provide at least a basic support to the system.

But there were other kind of problems regarding the technical solutions. E. g. it has been quite impossible to have a permanent radio frequency allocated to the project. We have tried for 3 years, but we still have to operate with a trial frequency. What the reason is – I don't know.

From the project start we had a local steering committee. They met frequently to discuss the project and to discuss the needs for educational training programme and technical support.

It was expected that the steering committee would control the whole project, but in reality some of the involved university libraries have acted very independently of the steering committee, which has caused different kind of problems. But within the last one and a half year things has changed to the better, and the steering committee has accepted that the chairman has an overall responsibility for the project, and both the communication and the control is now regained?

In co-operation with the Steering Committee we have been able to train and educate people at different technical levels, and within the last couple of years training programmes have ensured a better understanding of both system and technology and thereby improved the situation. But there are still problems: There are, for example, massive virus problems, inappropriate installations, examples of misuse of the system etc.

Not only the technical area has caused problems. It has been difficult for some of the libraries to understand and accept that the sponsor wanted reports of experiences with using the different kinds of equipment, and although the steering committee supported the demands for that, these problems are still to be solved.

The final barrier regards something less specific. Although – during the whole project – we have been met with great enthusiasm and commitment to the project, I myself has often felt that with Mr. Martey as an important exception – there has been a lack of responsibility for the project idea among most of the participating libraries. The overall responsibility for the project is still placed with the Danish Project group. We feel that we have to push and push to keep the project going – but again – there <u>are</u> differences between the participating libraries.

Economy as a barrier

The project economy has also caused us problems. So far the Danish sponsor Danida has financed the project with more than half a million dollars. But 3 or 4 times since we started there has been an uncertainty about further economical support to the project, which, of course, has caused problems with the planning in the Danish project group and in the steering committee. When Danida and other sponsors opened the PERI-programme last year we suddenly got new opportunities with the project and therefore started a new educational programme.

A minor point that also has caused frustration and irritation is that we started our project on the basis of idealism. None of the Danish participants have received extra money for running this project. We get our normal salaries, although we have spent a lot of our spare time, evenings and weekends on the project. We have done that because we felt that it is important and valuable for Ghana – and in due time – for other countries.

We therefore found it difficult to accept that every time a seminar was organized – and often when people were asked to present a report or do some investigation - they expected to be paid for it. We are not talking about a large amount of money. Only the principle is annoying to me. Well – I have now found out that people in Ghana – and in other countries – get paid for this kind of service – so I have learned to accept that too.

How is the situation today – what have we learned?

I started my presentation here today with admitting that I agree with Mr. Martey that our project is a success or at least <u>will become</u> a success.
I have concentrated on the barriers – but I am very much aware of the benefits, the results we have achieved so far.

Let me shortly mention – what I find important –

- The universities are all aware of the possibilities and the importance of the project. In the Danish project group we have met with the vice-chancellors at the university 3 times – and we have observed an increased respect for the university library services and a growing interest in supporting the libraries in becoming a Centre of Excellence in Information handling at the universities.

- The level of competence in information retrieval and in basic technological knowledge has increased, and although there are still problems with access to scientific and scholarly information for students, teachers and researchers in the universities things have proved considerably.

If we should start another project

It has been a trial project in many ways. And in our final report we will give an account of the results in access to information and our experiences in different kind of information, but we will also describe our experiences as project managers. In my description of the barriers I have already mentioned a lot of things that could be improved – and certainly will be improved if we were to start over once again. I will not repeat them, but just sum up.

- We need to be much more careful in analysing the local situation.
- Which kind of communication system is available?
- Which kind of information technology is still being used in the universities
- What is the level of competence?
- How is the co-operation between libraries and universities
- How is the co-operation between libraries organized?
    - We need to be more careful when introducing the project to ensure that all partners understand and accept the conditions and that the management of the universities from the beginning take on responsibility for the project
    - We need to establish a strong local steering of the project from the start and we need to establish an information system in order to follow the project progress closely in the local steering committee and in the Danish project group
    - We can hopefully get a clear description of the expectations from the donor organization as well of a clear description of their financial commitment, so that the budget for the project is fixed from start to end.

Despite of the problems, barriers, misunderstandings and communication problems it has been wonderful to have the opportunity to run a project like the Ghana Project.

Not only Ghana has learned from it - in the Danish Project Group we have learned a lot about project management. Last but not least – we have gotten a lot of friends in Ghana.