



# 68th IFLA Council and General Conference

## August 18-24, 2002

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**Code Number:** 061-094-E  
**Division Number:** VI  
**Professional Group:** Management of Library Associations  
**Joint Meeting with:** -  
**Meeting Number:** 94  
**Simultaneous Interpretation:** -

### **Challenges and strategies of library associations: an overview and examples of Uganda**

**Charles Batambuze**

General Secretary, Uganda Library Association

E-mail: [library@imul.com](mailto:library@imul.com)

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#### ***Abstract:***

*The paper aims at stimulating debate on best practices for the management of library associations by highlighting challenges and strategies of how these could be turned into opportunities. It draws from the experience of Uganda Library Association having gone through the learning curve of attempting to build a vibrant association and the prestige of the profession in Uganda. It sheds some light on what library association could undertake to make the profession they represent more visible.*

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#### **Historical Brief:**

The growth of professional consciousness started being firmly rooted in 1957, following the establishment of the East African Library Association (EALA). The East African Library Association (EALA) had branches in Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika and Zanzibar. It was a front for addressing professional challenges at the time, such as training, public relations, advocacy and information sharing. In 1972, a

decision to dissolve EALA and form national associations for Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania was taken. Ugandan LIS professionals drafted and adopted a constitution granting them professional autonomy and independence.

The EALA, had established some best practices in managing the affairs of LIS profession in the region. EALA already had a biennial conference to enable professionals share ideas, which evolved into the Standing Conference for Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL), with a current membership of 12 countries; to further promote the exchange of ideas, EALA in 1962, started publishing a biannual newsletter known as the East African Library Bulletin. Through this medium, articles and research reports on Librarianship and a calendar of events were published. These practices were to be passed onto the splinter associations in Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

### **Challenges & Strategies: Historical and Current Overview**

In the years that followed, Uganda went through several political, social, economic and technological changes which impacted LIS institutions as well as the Uganda Library Association as a sociological entity of Uganda. The association, for many years, had only a weak influence over its membership and the country at large. The history of Uganda is littered with examples of challenges that posed a real threat to the development of LIS institutions and professionalism. In the 1970s, Uganda was under the rulership of a military dictatorship which among other things issued a decree banning all forms of public gatherings and protests. In terms of public access to books and other information materials representing the dissenting positions, librarians were pushed beyond their ethical limits. They continually worked under the threat of arrest for performing the ethical duty of presenting all materials without discrimination. The 1980s and early 1990s were marked by severe economic hardships and recovery efforts. Economic recovery programmes rendered only a very limited interest and commitment to the development of library and information services in Uganda. As a result LIS institutions were starved of resources crucial for their expansion and qualitative improvement which eroded their effectiveness and extent of influence over the communities that they were designed to serve.

To reverse the above scenario, it was discovered that there was a need to build a strong professional association that would champion the cause of libraries and information services in Uganda. In 1999, ULA Executive Committee decided to carry out an analysis of the association to identify both internal and external challenges and to build a programme around these challenges so as to revolve the wheel of change forward. The challenges so identified, form the eight cornerstones of ULA strategic plan and following is an outline:

1. To establish and maintain a secretariat of ULA
2. To initiate and promote a culture of income generation for library and information institutions
3. To lay strategies for nation-wide membership drives and campaigns
4. To promote and offer opportunities for professional development of library and information science practitioners
5. To promote access of information to members of ULA and the general public
6. To promote and influence positive legislation and policy formulation in the field of library and information science
7. To design and implement community outreach activities

8. To co-operate and network with both local and international bodies with an interest in any of the activities of ULA.

The association had a very simple organisational model which over committed members of the Executive Committee. Activities of the association were being performed by part time volunteers mainly members of the executive, who alongside pressure from their employment were ineffective in fulfilling the aspirations of the association and membership expectations. We discovered the need to establish a fully fledged secretariat to assist in the daily operations and to also improve on the structure so as to reach out to professionals working in the countryside. In 2000, ULA managed to secure office space, but efforts to recruit a full time staff have been restrained by budget considerations.

The membership base of the association prior to 1989 was mainly made up of para-professionals who were in the majority. By 1999, membership calibre had improved greatly following the introduction of LIS training at degree level with ULA instigation. The most compelling needs were status, pay equity and recognition of LIS professionals by the public service; membership apathy, attracting and sustaining membership of young professionals in the association; reaching out to the older professionals to sustain their interest and support for the activities and programmes of the association and; building the capacity of members to take keen interest in issues of professional interest.

Another limiting factor to the effectiveness of the association was the very narrow resource base constituted mainly of membership subscriptions which were also irregular. We discovered that LIS institutions in Uganda were being run on very small budgets and were more prone to budget cuts. ULA programme strategies to counter this deficiency include: constantly improving on the quality of activities to attract membership; introduced a participation fee that would help us offset some of the organisational expenses; devised income generating activities; wrote proposals and marketed them to prospective donors.

As seen above, organisation, membership and finances were the three most important elements for which we had to devise strategies to build and maintain. Our programme has a mix of strategies and activities all devised to make the association more sensitive to the needs of the members and to extend ULA influence nationally and internationally. ULA tactical operations render the association to transform itself into a pressure group or a consulting group depending on the issues on hold.

ULA constantly revises and improves the quality of the programmes and activities so as to keep sustained members' interest in the association. This is done through allowing members to evaluate all the activities to which they may have been party either as implementers or as participants. This is in addition to ULA leadership being accountable to the membership through regular communications mainly through ULA Newsletter, ULA reports, ULA Web page, ULA Mailing list and involving members in most of the crucial debates.

Another milestone has been made in the area of building and extending partnerships with individuals and organisations that have an interest in any of the activities of the association. Through these partnerships, ULA has been able to have a web page hosted for them by the University of Oklahoma [http://www.ou.edu/cas/slis/ULA/ula\\_index.htm](http://www.ou.edu/cas/slis/ULA/ula_index.htm); have INASP support publication of newsletter; have the National Book Trust of Uganda (NABOTU) support the children's reading campaign programme; the British Council and American Center support several programmes and activities.

In the arena of public policy, ULA Legal and Policy Issues Committee has been on the look out for public policy issues with a bearing on the provision of library and information services. The effort has paid off because ULA has been involved in the formulation of several information related policies and plans. ULA

has also been consulted on bills and laws such as archives and records act, national library bill, copyright bill etc. This renewed interest by government in collaborating with ULA has strongly boosted the morale of the members and their determination to shape their destiny.

### **Conclusion:**

In 1999 when ULA carried out a review of the association in order to draw a strategic programme it was felt that the strategies drawn were equal to the tasks. Recently in 2002, during the review of the strategic programme, it was observed that the dynamic nature of the challenges required that we keep on the look out for solutions. That some of the strategies in our programme would remain relevant for as long as the challenge we were trying to solve lasted and hence the need to allow for a degree of flexibility to enable adoption of new techniques.

Finally, it is only library and information professionals who can stand up to speak for their rights and for the institutions under their custody. Would the library and information professionals please stand up to this task?

### **Reading List:**

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2. Magara, Elisam *LIS Professional Organisation in Uganda: the future perspective* 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Library and Information Science Conference for Uganda. Kampala: ULA, 2000 . Date last accessed: 16 May 2002. [http://www.ou.edu/cas/slis/ULA/ula\\_index.htm](http://www.ou.edu/cas/slis/ULA/ula_index.htm)
3. Uganda Library Association Strategic Plan March 2000-February 2002 (extended and Amended to cover 2002-2004). Kampala: ULA, 2000.