



AfLIA: paving the way for open access to a wealth of information

The African Library & Information Associations & Institutions (AfLIA) is a non-profit organisation set up to advance research and development, drive high, professional standards, and respond to the information needs of communities in Africa. They are at the forefront of the open access movement within the continent, forming important partnerships with fellow organisations to ensure Africans have free and consistently available access to research and information.

Libraries are often a part of life we take for granted. The only real downsides that many of us might face are the unexpected overdue library fees or the discovery that the book we're after isn't available.

But what about the inner-workings of these libraries? How do they ensure a continuous freedom of access to information? And how do they support communities, wherever they are in the world? Well, in Africa, the African Library & Information Associations & Institutions (AfLIA) have a large role to play.

The AfLIA has fast become the face of libraries in Africa, providing communities on the continent with a voice and ability to openly access research and information. Their Executive Director, Helena R. Asamoah-Hassan, operates at the heart of this, organising numerous events and meetings to advocate on behalf of the society. She recently spoke with us at *Research Features* about her role, and the importance of her association, in more detail.

Hi Helena! Can you tell us which projects you're particularly passionate about at the African Library & Information Associations & Institutions (AfLIA)?

I am passionate about the building of capacity of librarians, especially in supporting young people to carry out innovative services that satisfy the needs of the community, which bring about development and enrich lives.

Can you briefly tell us about the core principles of AfLIA's heritage and background, from its very beginning stages to now, and the core mission?

The core values and themes of AfLIA are: professionalism and inclusivity; integrity, transparency and accountability; innovation and creativity; customer focus, and access to information as a human right.

Our core mission is to empower the library and information community to actively promote the African development agenda through dynamic services that transform livelihoods. AfLIA was established in 2013 because of the need for a strong voice for

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librarians and libraries throughout Africa. Africa needed an organisation which speaks not only on a continental level, but also will work alongside national governments, to advocate for libraries and the communities they serve.

Can you tell us about your individual role at the AfLIA and the role of the whole board?

As the Executive Director, I am responsible for coordinating all organisation activities, including training and capacity building, implementing policies, carrying out projects to skill librarians for improved services, building new and maintaining existing partners, recruiting new members and retaining existing members of the association.

The Board – or the Governing Council – has the power to act on behalf of the association on all matters, with the exception of constitutional matters reserved to members at annual or special general meetings.

What is the main goal of AfLIA's strategic plan? And how does the AfLIA intend to achieve growth of information and accessibility in Africa?

AfLIA's main goal is to create an environment, through facilities and services, that enables the community to be well informed, ensuring information is used to enrich personal and national development.

We work with libraries, library associations and government agencies responsible for libraries to create policies that enable easy and equitable access to information, while also providing adequate library funding.

What are your thoughts on the open access and open science movements and how does AfLIA tie into these campaigns?

AfLIA believes in open access to information and the open science movement. This is especially due to our base in Africa, where most libraries cannot afford to purchase or subscribe to high impact research information – the work needed for development. Without open access to information, the development gap between the north and south could prove difficult to bridge.

We also believe that we have great researchers in Africa whose research results should be made available to the north, to help enable collaborative research. Without open access publishing, where costs are absorbed by grants or other bodies, these



Left: Dr Helena Asamoah-Hassan, Executive Director, AfLIA.

Above: AfLIA Management Team with partners at a meeting in Entebbe, Uganda.

researchers are not able to afford the cost of publishing and, therefore, their research is not exposed worldwide.

We also believe that there should be a system where a body, rather than an individual researcher or library, accounts for the costs involved. This system should make access free to libraries and researchers so that the researchers behind the information can be encouraged to continue.

What is the purpose of the three-core leadership programmes and how do they differ?

The three-core leadership programmes we have now are as follows:

- 1) The International Network of Emerging Library Innovators (INELI). This was established to support the transformation of public libraries into engines of development by supporting

upcoming public librarians to develop innovative services for the benefit of their communities. It is a network of library leaders around the world who have learnt from each other and worked online to acquire skills and share experiences in developing innovative services for their communities.

- 2) The Initiative Young African Library Innovators (IYALI) is a joint activity of AfLIA, International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), and Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), and this is managed by EIFL. The IYALI helps connect young librarians with their peers elsewhere in Africa, as well as in transitional and developing countries. It is envisioned that this will expand their outlook, and also help them to gain new ideas and create a network that will assist them in supporting each other with their work. The main aim is to empower

young and forward-looking African public librarians with the leadership potential to embrace, set and realise ambitious expectations for innovative library services. These services will contribute to sustainable development and provide the librarians with the confidence and vision to continue transforming library services, ensuring that libraries across Africa are constantly evolving to meet individual and community needs.

- 3) The third and final programme is the AfLIA Leadership Academy (AfLA). This aims to provide in-service training to middle managers of African Public Libraries to effectively take charge of 21st century libraries. The training is expected to bridge the gap between management of collections and link them, on one hand, to communities and, on the other hand, make libraries vibrant centres of communities, combining people, information and services. The academy will enable library leaders to reflect on their leadership styles and discover how they can use their position to uplift that community, to form partnerships with non-library organisations, and develop comprehensive services that positively impact the everyday lives of the people.

Can you tell us about the recently launched President's Fund for AfLIA? Has this been successful so far?

The President's Fund is intended to encourage innovation in library and information services, and to ensure the sustainability of AfLIA. The launch was very successful but donations have not been very encouraging so far and therefore, we are still devising new strategies to reach our target of \$1 million.

What other methods does AfLIA use to gain support and funding to spur innovation in library and information services delivery as well as ensure the sustainability of AfLIA?

We build relationships with partners who are like-minded and pool our resources together to carry out projects and activities. We also have members who pay fees, currently an estimated 137 from 28 countries in Africa, and still counting!

From your website, you have some 'big name' organisations listed as partners affiliated with AfLIA, especially the likes of the Global Libraries of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) – how did you secure these partnerships? How do you encourage and secure partnerships from organisations?

Yes, Global Libraries and AfLIA share a

similar vision for libraries in Africa, that is, making the Africa library field strong. Therefore it was beneficial and a less stressful effort in seeking partnerships with them.

We believe that in the current global environment, no one organisation can go it alone if they hope to make a lasting impact. It is with this mindset that we seek partnerships. We are not always successful, as some think that we are competitors, but others see that, with several hands, a daunting task can be successfully completed.

What does the future hold for AfLIA?

We are very optimistic about the future of AfLIA because it is the only continental body for libraries and librarians in Africa, and also one of the very few in the world. We have a crop of hard working and dedicated staff members, who always go the extra mile to ensure that we carry out our objectives. We also have a strong Board with members that are great advocates for AfLIA.

Although we are only four years old, the work we have done within this period amazes a lot of people. Our existing partners believe in us and are willing to continue working with us to assist in the formation of new partner relationships. AfLIA provides the strong voice and arm that libraries, librarians in Africa and the communities we serve, desperately need.

• **For more information about AfLIA and to help support their funding goal, please visit their website at www.aflia.net.**



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