Strengthening the foundations
– sharing expertise in East Africa

Raising the profile of librarians requires a strong professional identity at all levels. Here, members of the **Information Science Foundation for Eastern Africa** discuss why a new association was needed, and how it is helping to share expertise across the region.

An increasingly connected world brings new opportunities for knowledge sharing and makes professional development an ever more important part of any field. This is true at local as well as global levels. East Africa already has several national library and information associations, and in fact the current ones in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania evolved from former branches of the now defunct East African Library Association. While national activity is strong, a need for greater regional networking led to the creation, in 2005, of a new regional association for the library and information science (LIS) community – the Information Science Foundation for Eastern Africa (ISFEA). The foundation was established to combine expertise from across the region's information community, to link national communities more effectively, and to encourage new partnerships to develop between the many different areas and organisations that they represent. In doing so, it aims to build wider awareness of the information profession's valuable contributions to regional and national development, and to encourage others to make greater use of this expertise.

Knowledge matters – and it needs to be shared

Knowledge is critical across all aspects of human life, and information can be a powerful agent of change. Achieving equitable and sustainable development depends critically on people's ability to access appropriate and high quality sources of information. Raising awareness of important social issues and collecting the knowledge needed for development planning and programming all depend on the flow and capture of information. The creation and application of new knowledge have long contributed to the growth and change of societies and economies, and to the welfare of their people. Knowledge of how to do things, how best to communicate and how to work with other people is perhaps the most precious wealth that humans possess.

Most professional groups emphasise teaching, learning and the acquisition of knowledge as a way for their members to develop careers and to increase their overall contributions to society. The growth of knowledge, and part-

ISFEA project meeting

icularly the speed at which information can be disseminated, has accelerated over time. This has clearly had positive outcomes for those with access to this, but negative effects for those without. Effective mechanisms for sharing knowledge can help societies to learn from successful examples elsewhere, to scale up their own successes or to address the challenges in implementing these. Often, though, the lack of such mechanisms results in learning and information transfers that are sporadic or piecemeal, hindering further knowledge development.

What ISFEA will do

ISFEA was founded in 2005 to serve as a bridge for information sharing across the many library and information groups which already exist in the region. Members include a number of highly qualified and experienced information science professionals and representatives from publishers and industry. To date, much of our affiliation has been with local bodies and initiatives in Uganda – the majority of members are also involved with other organisations, including the Uganda Library and Information Association, the Consortium of Uganda University Libraries, the British Council in Uganda, and, outside of the library community, I-Network (an ICT for development organisation), Management Forum Uganda and the United Nations Association of Uganda. This has helped us to build good links between these organisations and ISFEA, and has strengthened our own activities. With the recent revival of the East African Community, our intention is to expand links with other professional bodies and initiatives in Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi.

ISFEA's mandate is to establish a vibrant LIS identity within an African context, and in doing so to enhance the contributions that it makes to democracy, education and development in the region. Our vision is to have a knowledgeable and information-driven society at all levels – community, national and regional

– and to contribute to national and regional development through the deployment and demonstration of best practice in the way that information is generated, processed, stored, retrieved and finally disseminated to users. By reducing the information gap and by increasing general awareness of the field, IFSEA hopes to achieve a genuinely knowledgeable society.

Current activities

ISFEA pursues its mandate under four main programme areas:

- capacity building for an information science identity
- advocacy and public relations
- research, project planning and implementation
- initiatives on development and collaboration

Regular monthly informal talks are organised, with speakers reflecting on their own work and experiences. In doing this, ISFEA aims to create an enabling environment for other groups to share knowledge with colleagues on important LIS issues.

A research and projects unit has also been established. A major initiative has been the creation of a competency database, which brings together details of LIS professionals with particular areas of expertise, and who are willing to act as resource people or consultants to other organisations. This database has been widely publicised, both within the educational community and also externally to NGOs, government department and corporate bodies. It is hoped that this will act as a channel both for members to advertise their expertise, and for organisations to identify skilled professionals according to particular project needs. Focus areas include expertise in:

- establishing and running libraries, resource and document centres, and registries, as well as strengthening and improving those already in existence
- consulting in software and service procurement, including cataloguing and indexing, and developing internal library policies, procedures and information management manuals
- designing and developing websites and web hosting
- designing and developing databases (particularly in health information)
- managing corporate digital memory, including digital repositories
- training in information science and information literacy

Establishing solid partnerships with organisations which share a common vision is another

Council Members in session, March 2007

way in which ISFEA is in a good position to share limited information and knowledge resources. ISFEA has so far offered technical assistance to a number of other organisations. Examples include:

- Design and delivery of 1,000 interactive CD-ROMs containing key information for the AIDS Information Centre in Uganda.
- Development and installation of a digital library for the Ugandan Ministry of Health's resource centre.
- Compilation of documents for publication for the National Agriculture Advisory Services (NAADS).

Currently, ISFEA is engaged in providing information services to the rural poor by implementing the Kabubu Rural Library Project (KRLP), a collaboration between ISFEA and the Kabubu Education and Health Treatment Centre; ISFEA is conducting a diagnostic 'information needs' checklist for the centre. A proposal for establishing an LIS internship programme for university students professionals is also being finalised, which it is hoped will include an outreach component to bring LIS professionals into Uganda's rural communities.

Firm foundations take time to develop

During its initial creation, ISFEA members had a crisis of expectations. The new body promised to bring huge benefit to its members and other stakeholders, and they anticipated that this could be achieved within a relatively short time. Forming a stable professional body takes time,

however, and this is particularly true in the sub-Saharan region, where lower literacy rates generally mean that awareness of the LIS profession and the skills of its practitioners is much lower. While ISFEA members have shown considerable interest in our activities, ensuring sustainability is costly, both financially and in terms of time. The benefits that accrue from ISFEA will not be measured solely by the size of its membership, however, but by the degree to which it can help to meet the information needs of the East African community as a whole.   **L**

Michael Kasusse is Health Information Specialist at Albert Cook Medical Library, Makerere University, Uganda.

Yusuf Kiwala is Systems Administrator/ Research Assistant at National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), Uganda.

Robert Ntalaka is Information and Documentation Officer at the AIDS Information Centre, Uganda.

Richard Sennoga is Data Management Specialist at the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Uganda.

Kendra Albright is Lecturer at the Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield, UK.
www.isfea.net