1. INTRODUCTION

Within the knowledge society that has recently emerged, special libraries, as custodians and disseminators of subject specific information, have a very important role to play. The value of timely, accurate and relevant information has increasingly been acknowledged as providing a leading edge in the modern competitive world. Special libraries have thus been equipped to support their parent organizations by providing the information required to ensure the survival and continued existence of their parent bodies. However, not all special libraries are up to the task, as some are severely hampered by constraints that negatively impact on their ability to deliver the necessary services. This is especially true of special libraries in developing countries, especially those on the African continent.

This chapter will look at the development of special libraries on the African continent, and will provide an overview of noteworthy developments in specific countries. The challenges, issues and trends will also be discussed.

2. TYPOLOGY OF SPECIAL LIBRARIES

With the development of different types of libraries over the centuries, an effort was made to “typecast” or group together libraries with similar characteristics, qualities, elements, origins, functions or compositions (Ocholla 1993). Although numerous library typologies currently exist, there are some common approaches used in the grouping process. According to Ocholla (1993:27), these approaches include: “functionality, territorial distribution, ownership, location, administrative convenience and the position in the social system”. Special libraries, due to their unconventional nature, challenge library typologists in providing a clear-cut description that typifies all the libraries included in this group.

Libraries consisting of specialized collections date back to the clay library of the Babylonian king, Assurbanipal. Yet the term “special libraries” was only coined in 1908 when it was decided at a meeting of librarians to call the emerging libraries in America “special libraries” (Singh 2006). Despite the fact that these libraries have been around for many centuries, the concept has not yet been clearly defined and many opinions as to what exactly special libraries entail still prevail. As Poll (2007) points out: “in most cases definitions indicate what it (special libraries) is not, rather than what it is, for example it is not a public, national, academic or school library”. Adding to the confusion is the fact that these libraries cannot be typified by a single typology or specific set of characteristics because
many types are included, such as news libraries, law libraries, libraries for the blind and deaf, museums, archives, corporate libraries and non-profit organization libraries. Additionally, these libraries are also not identified by a common name, for they are also known as Information centers, Information Analysis Centers, Documentation Centers, Information Resource Centers or Knowledge Management Centers. Ownership of the libraries also varies and includes role players such as governments and their departments, non-governmental agencies, commercial firms and news agencies.

Despite the above, consensus does exist about the fact that special libraries serve a very specific clientele, in most cases a very small group of users with very specific requirements, and have highly specialized collections concentrating on a specific subject, field or format. Staff complements are in most cases very small but highly specialized in terms of subject specific knowledge and library expertise (Bauer 2003; Lefebvre 1996; Poll 2007). Poll (2007) distinguishes between special libraries serving only their parent organizations, and those that are open to both the parent organization’s staff and the general public.

The role of the special library is very closely related to its institutional activities, and is therefore mainly focused on making knowledge and expertise available to further the institution’s goals.

The service delivery of these libraries is based on the following (Poll 2007:4):

- A collection that is tailored to suit the needs of the clientele
- Collections and services that consider current needs more than possible future needs
- The speed and accuracy of reference services
- Proactive delivery of relevant information to users
- Customized user services (personal profiles, alerting services, selective dissemination of information)
- Efficient background services
- Cost-efficiency of services

Collections within these institutions aim to serve the specific information needs of the organizations that they serve in order to increase the productivity and efficiency of the parent organization. This customization is achieved by reducing the time employees spend on data searching, and by providing information that can facilitate improved decision-making.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIAL LIBRARIES IN AFRICA

The growth and development of special libraries has been vital to library development in Africa. According to Sitzman (1988), the establishment of the first spe-
cial libraries in Africa, with the exception of a few old repositories in Egypt, Mali and Ethiopia, dates back to the turn of the nineteenth century and was mainly due to the efforts of colonial governments. These libraries aimed mainly to assist colonial administrators in their governing duties, or were alternatively driven by the colonial government’s interests in medicine, agriculture and geology. Most of these libraries started out without any real planning and on a very small scale, without too many information resources (a few publications, files and some journal and/or information service subscriptions), no qualified staff, and little or no funding. It was only at a later stage that funding, budgeting, and the employment of qualified staff became important issues (Sturges & Neil 1990).

Research institutes and surveyors concentrating on the mineral wealth of Africa showed the most prominent growth in terms of special libraries, with Sturges & Neil (1990) reporting that 20 libraries attached to national geological surveys already existed in 1967. Due to the lack of trained staff, qualified geologists acted as information officers that presided over collections consisting of a few books, plenty of reprints, pamphlets, maps, microforms and photographs. Currently, special libraries in the agricultural sector are the most prolific because most research institutes on the continent tend to concentrate on this field.

With the exception of a few countries, such as South Africa and Egypt, ownership of the majority of African special libraries rests with governments and their agencies; very few are in private or corporate/organizational hands. Huge disparities in their occurrence throughout the continent also exist, with South Africa and Egypt being the leaders in terms of numbers, Information and Communication Technology access and general development; meanwhile many countries such as Libya and Morocco are virtually void of any such libraries (Wertsman 1996). Closely related to the well-being of existing special libraries is the political and economic stability of a country, which in many African countries is precariously balanced. Ikoja-Odongo (2004) noted that peace was an essential element in the development and utilization of information services.

Collections range from being excellent to very poor, and from being relatively big to very small in source numbers. For example, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Library in Ethiopia contains 60,000 titles, while some special libraries in Sierra Leone only have about 500 (Wedgeworth 1993). Most of these collections are still print-based, but there is currently a drive towards providing access to digital documentation (Mutula, n.d.)

Donor funding from foreign countries has influenced many special library initiatives, sometimes resulting in insufficient planning and the establishment of a service environment insensitive to the needs of the African user (Baldwin & Varady 1989; Dimitroff 1993).

Despite many developments in the African special library sector, many authors still lament obstacles such as insufficient funding, collections, and buildings, and inadequate skills, training and services, which need to be addressed in order for these information providers to be seen as effective and efficient contributors to
their parent organizations (Amonoo & Azubuike 2005; Chisenga 2006, Ikoja-Odongo 2004; Were 2006). Despite these shortcomings, Sturges and Neil (1990) advocate the important role that these libraries have played and are still playing in providing access to information resources to researchers and potentially being important instruments in the provision of information to target groups within their parent organizations.

4. SPECIAL LIBRARIES: A REGIONAL OVERSIGHT

The African continent is the second largest continent in the world, consisting of 53 countries. The continent is generally subdivided into four regions, i.e. Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern. Occasionally a fifth region, i.e. Central Africa, is used. For the purposes of this chapter, the Central and Eastern regions were combined.

In terms of the existence of special libraries, huge disparities abound between regions, and even between neighbouring countries. Many factors play a role in this, such as the importance attached by organizations to information access, the peace and stability of a country, and the leadership and skills offered by the library professionals.

4.1 Southern Africa

Countries falling within this region include: South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland and Lesotho.

This region boasts the country with the most prolific special library sector on the whole continent, i.e. South Africa, which has more than 600 such libraries. South Africa is also one of relatively few countries on the continent in which the government and its departments are not the major stakeholders of these libraries, with only 79 belonging to these institutions (Burger 2006/2007). The rest are all attached to private companies, especially those in the commercial and technological sector, mining houses, law firms, and financial institutions; and in private hands. Some of these libraries are also found in parastatals such as the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) (Stilwell 2007). These libraries are dispersed throughout the country’s cities and towns.
Special libraries within the other countries in the region are mainly found within major cities and are much fewer in number. Botswana’s special libraries are mostly found within government agencies, within research institutes that are privately owned or belong to parastatal organizations, or within the financial sector, religious institutions, management consultancies, United Nations agencies, regional institutions such as the South African Development Community (SADC) and embassies (Nkanga 1999). Together with the South African libraries, automation is the best developed in this country. Zambian libraries specialize in fields such as the natural sciences, agriculture, law, education, baking and mining; and are in most cases financed and owned by government. To overcome the paucity of information sources in the country, a very good informal Interlibrary Loan scheme exists between these libraries and the University of Zambia (Wedgeworth 1993). Other than the government, many Zimbabwean special libraries are attached to Non-governmental organizations (NGO’s). It also contributes towards the publication of important publications such as yearbooks and other regional publications (Mamvoto & Mutasa, 2007).

Swaziland’s special libraries are found in most government ministries and international, private and Non-Governmental organizations, mainly to serve the needs of their parent organizations (Kunene n.d). Because it is a very small country with many pressing needs, Information Technology has not yet been fully introduced in all its special libraries, with the notable exception of libraries belong-
ing to international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program, United States Information Service, British Council, and the United Nations Children’s Fund, all of which have Internet access (Information Outlook Online, 2000). Lesotho, a country situated within South Africa, has very few special libraries, most of which are owned by government, but a few are also owned by research institutions and NGO’s (Eifl.Net Lesotho, n.d.).

Namibian special libraries are mainly in the hands of government, organizations, churches and some private and foreign companies. The government’s libraries, although found in all the departments, actually form one big library because the processing of all documents is done centrally and then dispersed to the mini-libraries. This is done to promote uniformity in all the mini-libraries within the organization. The computerization of services is also well advanced within the government’s libraries, with services that allow internal and external networking (Morgentern 1993). The organization of parastatal and private special libraries ranges from well organized to disorganized, with many undocumented collections. The staff also ranges from being professionally trained to not having any training at all (Tötemeyer 1993).

4.2 Eastern and Central Africa

This region includes countries such as Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Malawi, Sudan, and Kenya.

The first special library in Kenya was founded in 1902 when a local newspaper, “The East African Standard”, was established and required a library to support its reporting staff. Though prolific developments took place in the special library sector during the ensuing years, most such institutions, especially those affiliated with government departments, collapsed with the demise of the East African Community in 1967. Despite being in a rather neglected state, many of these libraries still have collections of grey literature, specifically government reports (IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Kenya, 1999). Some excellent libraries survived or were established in the period post-independence, some of which are currently seen as leaders in their fields of expertise in the region, such as the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI), the Kenya National Archives Library, and the Medical Training College Library. Libraries belonging to research institutions are in possession of the best collections and are also the best organized and serviced. However, most NGO’s, religious institutions and cultural centers established by foreign missions and the United Nations also have well developed libraries, most of which have embraced Information Technology, thus enabling them to deliver computerised search and retrieval services (IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Kenya 1999).

Tanzanian special libraries vary in size and effectiveness. While the Library of Mineral Resources is one of the best in Africa, those belonging to the government departments are poorly developed and most are without professional staff (Dahl-
Some government departments, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, provide a centralized service, which means that acquisitioning is done centrally and then dispersed to branch libraries (MSN Encarta, 2007). Other than the government, NGO’s and charity organizations are the major stakeholders of these libraries. Malawian special libraries date back to 1899, when the first agricultural library was established (Ranashinge 2006). Currently, central and branch libraries are maintained by the Ministry of Agriculture at research stations, training centers and divisional offices throughout the country. Resource acquisitions are performed at the central libraries, and materials are then sent to the branch libraries (MSN Encarta 2007). Though most of the special libraries are owned by government agencies, some belong to religious organizations, and a few can be found servicing hospitals throughout the country (Wertsman 1996).

The first special library in Uganda was set up in 1897 at Mulango Hospital, Kampala (Plumbe in Ranasinghe 2007). Currently, the country has a few special libraries mainly situated in Kampala or Entebbe, and owned by government, research institutions and commercial institutions such as the East African Development Bank (Akita, n.d.). In Rwanda, most ministries and public institutions have documentation centers of various sizes. There are also libraries belonging to religious organizations and dioceses (Wedgeworth, 1993).

Ethiopia has a relatively long history of special libraries, having for centuries housed old repositories in churches and monasteries of religious materials. Since the 1974 Revolution, many new special libraries have opened, and computers have been integrated into these libraries since the early 1980’s. It was, however, only in the 1990’s that automation was widely incorporated into the service delivery of these libraries. Currently, special libraries are serving government agencies, banks, the Institute for Public Administration, police, and the Air Force Colleges, as well as international organizations such as the Economic Commissions for Africa and the International Livestock Research Institute (Tsigemelak 2006).

4.3 Western Africa

Countries situated in this region are: Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Gabon, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkino Faso and Mali.

Within this region, the quality of special libraries ranges from poor to excellent. However, the libraries seem to function in isolation as not much is known about individual library holdings outside each institution.

Nigeria probably has the best developed special library system in this region, and the libraries are grouped into the following categories: private educational institutions, international organizations, foreign government, government and professional associations (Ajibero in Okiy, n.d.). The collections of these libraries range from grossly inadequate to excellent. The libraries falling under the auspices of the research institutions belonging to the Federal Ministry of Technology, as well as those belonging to foreign agencies such as the British Council and the
United States Information Service, are deemed as those best endowed (Wedgeworth 1993). Okiy (n.d.) places the blame of the poor state of the other research libraries on the shoulders of government, whose duty it is to fund these institutions. This state of affairs stems from the fact that the government is yet to see libraries and information as important commodities for commerce and industry.

Angola, despite still recovering from a crippling war, has got a sizable number of special libraries, most of which reside under the jurisdiction of the National Department of Libraries and are administratively linked to the ministries they serve. Although located throughout the country, (Notes: although?) the major libraries are found in Huambo, Luanda and Lubango, where they specialize in agriculture and animal husbandry (Wertsman, 1996). Even though the first special libraries date back to the period of colonial administration, the development of modern Ghanaian special libraries has been the direct result of the government’s drive to embark on a modern economy. This occurred because the gathering of scientific data resulted in the establishment of many research institutes, and with them, libraries to support their research functions. Special libraries are currently found within research, financial, industrial, and commercial institutions, as well as within government ministries and departments and parastatal organizations (Alehma 1997).

Mali, together with Ethiopia, has a rich – though mainly undocumented – history concerning the storage of manuscripts in private collections (Diakite 1999). Special libraries stem from the period of colonization, during which they were only available to civil servants. Currently, there are about 64 special libraries in this country (Wertsman 1996).

Sierra Leone, which also only recently came out of a civil war, has a very small number (18) of special libraries concentrating on very limited subjects, but makes a very clear distinction between three major categories of special libraries, i.e.: special libraries, documentation centers, and information centers. Special libraries are associated with professional and learned societies, government departments, and research centers, while information centers are principally associated with government, research, and industrial establishments which require the provision of specific information (such as the Shell – Oil Refinery – library). Documentation Centers, such as the National Agricultural Documentation Center and the Development Center at the Ministry of Economic Development and Planning, process literature in their respective fields (Kargbo 2002).

Within the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Board of Libraries, Archives and Documentation is the central management, coordination and supervision organ of the library, archives and documentation centers. Their function is to oversee the planning and development of all documentary structures within the country and to set the standards that will ensure efficient performance by these structures. The Board is not seen as very effective, as it only supports services rendered by the
Peoples National Library, The National Documentation Center and the National Archives, while all other special libraries have to fend for themselves (Wedgeworth 1993).

Special libraries within Gabon, Gambia, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast and Niger are small in number and are mainly in the hands of government, research institutions, foreign institutions or religious institutions. Some of these libraries, for example those attached to research institutes in the Ivory Coast, contain only very small collections of less than 500 volumes, while others, such as the Center Régional de Recherche et de Documentation la Tradition Orale in Niger, are renowned for their collections. Untrained staff are a common problem within many of these libraries (Wedgeworth, 1993).

4.4 Northern Africa

Countries constituting the Northern regions include: Egypt, Liberia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania.

Special library development in this region ranges from advanced (Egypt), to very poor (Liberia). Political and economic instability is a major deterrent to the development and maintenance of special libraries in the region. Donor-funding plays a major role in the establishment of the region’s special libraries, often leading to ineffective and overpriced document delivery systems (Dimitroff 1993).

According to Dimitroff (1993), Egypt has the best developed information system in North Africa with approximately 380 special libraries in the region. These are found in government departments, semi-government institutions and learned societies. Very few are situated in the private sector. Although special libraries are normally allocated larger budgets than other library types, the amount is still paltry when compared to similar institutions abroad. The paucity of resources and the high costs associated with the printed medium have necessitated special librarians to form strong personal networks to gain access to other information resources. These networks utilize foreign supported libraries, such as the British Council Library or the American Center Library. A clear distinction is made between Information Centers and special libraries, with the services of the former seen as superior to the latter in terms of service delivery. Centers also provide indexing and abstracting services, translations, bibliographic activities, Current Awareness Services, and when access to digital networks are available, electronic searches (Wedgeworth 1993).

Algeria’s special libraries are mostly affiliated to special schools and institutes, with some containing very good collections on commerce, the fine arts, agriculture, hydrography and engineering. Within countries such as Liberia, Libya, Morocco and Mauritania, only a few special libraries exist.
5. STATUS AND CHALLENGES FACING SPECIAL LIBRARIES

5.1 Status of special libraries/librarians

The library and information systems of developing countries, specifically those from Africa, are generally backward and constrained (Kebede 1999). The inability of libraries to present any tangible evidence of their achievements, and librarians’ failure to supply supporting evidence of their worth, often leads to disenchantment amongst employers, resulting in a low status being bestowed on the library profession and its services. Marginalization results in libraries being under-resourced, understaffed and underdeveloped, depriving them of the means to meet the demands of their constituencies, and thus being perceived as ineffective and therefore expendable. Special libraries, by nature of their ownership and functions, need to prove their worth and ability to contribute to the general productivity and efficiency of the parent organization, but literature reveals that their status is not much higher than that of other library types (Nwalo 2000; Okiy n.d.; Wedgeworth 1993).

5.2 Collections and local content

A collection’s status is generally dependent on the status accorded to the library and the services it delivers by the parent organization, and therefore can range from being of a very high standard to extremely poor. Collection sizes also vary considerably, from tens of thousands of items to less than 500 (Tsigemelek 2006). A general trend amongst special libraries is to concentrate on collecting materials that reflect global content rather than local content – i.e. locally owned and adapted or relevant knowledge of the parent organization – thus providing material irrelevant to the needs of the local situation. This problem is enhanced by the limited use of local languages on the Internet, where English is predominantly used to convey information (Amonoo & Azibuike n.d.). Mchombu (2007) advocates the production and repackaging of information rich in local content rather than perpetuating various forms of intellectual and cultural dependence. Through the practice of repackaging/restructuring local information, specific client needs can be catered for, and information scattered across a large number of documents can be consolidated, leading to more efficient service delivery (Singh, 2006). Closely related to this is the development of local digital content. As Africa’s technology moves into the 21st century, special libraries’ clients have begun to demand access to information at all times, thus necessitating the existence of accessible online services. Mutula (n.d) views the development of local digital content as a huge opportunity for Africa, especially with governments becoming more aware of the capital outflow when purchasing foreign materials and services instead of providing their own local content. (Notes: revise, unclear)
5.3 Training of skilled information workers

Special library training has until recently been entrenched in a value system based on western principles which are alien to the African situation (Sturges & Neil 1990). Although reforms are currently underway in most African library schools, the Africanization of library training is still not adequate and schools have been unable to produce information professionals with relevant knowledge and competencies. According to Ikoja-Odongo (2004:3), the curricula are “not inclusive of the information demands of the emerging African society”. The lack of practical, hands-on experience and the continued teaching of traditional library skills that focus primarily on the printed medium (i.e. classification, cataloguing and referencing) are factors contributing towards Africa’s digital and information skills shortage.

In response to the lack of ICT competencies, many African library schools have recently introduced Information technology subjects, although these do not seem current and relevant enough to address the needs of the new e-environment. Additionally, most schools are still hampered by a lack of basic resources, such as enough computers to provide efficient training (Nwalo 2000; Ocholla and Bothma 2007; Rosenberg 2006). The lack of sufficient ICT training has had a direct impact on the ability of special librarians to perform effectively in their work environment, as they currently need both technological skills and subject specialization to provide the information required by their clientele.

The special librarian’s work environment is characterized by continuous change, necessitating new skills and competencies to function in a volatile business environment. Technological advances require special librarians to redirect their traditional skills and functions to areas where they can add value to their organizations. Competencies that are currently required include: “knowledge of relevant information sources, access, technology and management, and the ability to apply this knowledge to provide a high quality information service” (Muller 2007). Skills issues are thus related to the development of management skills, the ability to understand the business principles on which their parent organizations are based, and the development of ICT skills (Kavulya 2007 and Muller 2007). Due to the total lack, or irrelevancy, of the continuous education programs meant to hone skills in African library schools, special librarians currently have to rely on their own initiatives to upgrade their skills and competencies, mostly through conferences and workshops, which in most cases do not cater for hands-on experience.

5.4 Library automation

To take advantage of the benefits that Information Technology offers in terms of information management, libraries have to automate their services. During the early ‘80’s, African special libraries were among the first libraries automating their services. (Notes: paragraph requires better continuity/readability) This was
done on a very small scale due to a lack of funds, and automation was introduced using local IT departments and programming experts (Mutula n.d.). Other automation initiatives came from organizations such as the United States Information Services and British Council media centers, which had access to significantly more funds. In the late 1980’s, UNESCO provided software that was mostly free to libraries in the government, public and private sectors, enabling them to use CDS/ISIS software to develop in-house databases of local collections. Donor-funded CD-ROMS also influenced library automation (Mutula n.d). Countries such as Nigeria, Botswana, Egypt and South Africa have since taken a lead in library automation within special libraries, while other countries such as Ethiopia (Tsigemelek 2006) have implemented automation programs on a smaller scale. (Notes: varying degrees??) Although web-based systems have been the norm since the early 90’s in many libraries worldwide, only a few libraries in Africa have created a web existence and web-services.

The shortage of skilled manpower needed to implement IT programs in African libraries is a major problem (Nwalo 2000). For example, special libraries in Botswana experienced a number of problems during implementation due to the lack of staff with computer experience. (Notes: what problems? Example insufficient) Lack of experience also influences the selection and acquisition of applicable software programs. In many cases, software selection is based on reports received from other users at conferences, and not based on thorough systems analysis (Adogbeji et al., n.d). Alternatively, librarians rely on the vendors of computer systems for both their hardware and software requirements (Tiamiyu in Adogbeji et al., n.d). Nwalo (2000) expressed the hope that the implementation of Information Technology courses in African library schools would eventually overcome the current manpower shortage.

5.5 Information Communication Technologies

Modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), specifically computers, information networks and software applications, enable special libraries to provide a variety of information services to their clients, faster and more efficiently than ever before in history. In Africa, libraries have adopted and are utilizing ICTs for various services, although huge disparities exist in the numbers available and the levels of utilization, not only between libraries, but also between countries within regions (Chisenga 2006). Were (2006) observed that even in institutions with high levels of ICT development, library units remained inadequately equipped.

Despite being the continent with the fastest growing telecommunications infrastructure, Africa’s ICT diffusion is still lagging behind, and the digital divide between the continent and information-rich developed countries is increasing daily. Although Africa has 13% of the world’s population, only 2% of the world’s tele-
phone lines and 1% of Internet connectivity (measured in terms of Internet hosts and users) can be found on the continent (Ongusola, 2005). Internet utilization is mainly centered in two countries, i.e. South Africa and Egypt, which respectively service 27.2% and 20.9% of approximately 12.9 million users (Were, 2006). Some of the factors responsible for these disparities are inadequate infrastructure; high tariff structures; strict regulatory structures; inappropriate or weak policy regimes; institutional weaknesses; limited economic resources; low tele-density; inadequate personal computers and internet hosts; insufficiently skilled technicians building ICT infrastructure; limited computer literacy; and the lack of available telecommunications networks (Mutula 2003:13; Oyelaran-Oyeyinka & Adeya 2004:2).

Chisenga (2006:16) identified six factors that prevent African libraries from taking full advantage of all the benefits offered by ICTs:

- Financing and sustainability of ICT infrastructure
- ICT technical infrastructure
- Using and managing ICT facilities
- Preservation of digital-based information resources
- Management of intellectual property rights
- Institutional policy and strategy

The implementation and utilization of ICTs requires funding for hardware, software, license fees, maintenance, upgrading of systems, telecommunications and subscriptions. With funding for special libraries being reduced worldwide, the ability of African special libraries to introduce and sustain ICT infrastructure in their institutions has been hugely diminished. In many cases, IT projects have been implemented and consequently disbanded or have failed to migrate to modern systems due to a shortage of funds. The constant change in the ICT industry and the lack of technically skilled library staff often results in inappropriate or outdated systems, or the operation of systems with insufficient bandwidth, leading to an increased amount of frustration with inefficient information systems (Chisenga 2006).

According to Chisenga (2006), many libraries in Africa introduced ICTs for the mere sake of having these technologies, without considering or creating a formal strategy for the acquisition, use and sustainability of the ICTs. Such a strategy could have assisted in aligning the introduction of ICTs with the institutional goals and missions of the parent organization, which in the case of special libraries is paramount to their continued existence.

5.6 Library networking and resource sharing

The paucity of information resources and dwindling funds necessitated African special libraries to form partnerships with other special libraries. Many formal and informal networks within countries exist; for example, in Egypt, Botswana and Zambia, libraries are cooperating in the fields of information sharing and the sharing of staff knowledge and expertise (Dimitroff 1993; Sekabembe 2002). Joining
consortia which consist not only of special libraries but also other library types in order to share both print and digital based resources is becoming common for many special libraries (Mutula n.d; Eifl.Net n.d). Networks extending across country borders, e.g. the SABINET system in Southern Africa, also exist (Jalloh, 1999). Networking with special libraries affiliated to international organizations such as the British Council and the United Nations is also common, since these libraries have bigger budgets and better access to information resources from abroad. Sanni in Nwalo (2000) reports that several information networks exist in Africa. Most notable in terms of special libraries is PADISNET (Pan African Documentation Center Network), which aims to connect African centers performing research on development planning for data and information exchange. A major problem with most formal networks is that they are initiated and sustained by donor bodies from outside Africa, making them vulnerable should the bodies withdraw their support (Nwalo 2000).

6. TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

6.1 Development of Consortia

Lack of funding impacts negatively on a number of aspects of library service delivery, making it difficult to access or acquire the required information resources, or negotiate competitive prices for IT hardware and software. Consortia provide a platform for collective bargaining with publishers, distributors or the vendors of library resources. This may result in access to a much wider range of resources at reduced costs. Consortia also allow access to sources available in other libraries at a very low cost to the user, enabling librarians to efficiently meet their information needs (Singh 2006). An added advantage is the fact that consortia allow library staff to exchange knowledge and expertise. Although Sekabembe (2002) reports that with the exception of South Africa, consortia development in Africa is still in its infancy and experiencing many operational challenges, librarians should keep seeking solutions, as the advantages of such a co-operative system for libraries in general, and special libraries in particular, outweighs any negatives.

6.2 Benchmarking and the measurement of value

The last decade was a period of upheaval and turmoil for special libraries, with many of them, especially those affiliated to the corporate sector, experiencing severe cuts or getting closed down or outsourced to external information vendors (Poll 2007). According to Henczel (2007), the environment within which special libraries exist is one of emerging technologies, evolving user expectations, diminishing budgets, changing cultural climates and competing organizationorganizational priorities. Chung (2007) therefore advocates that in order for special li-
braries to justify their continued existence and garner support and funding, the measurement of their economic value is necessary.

Two methods can be employed to calculate value, i.e. measuring the cost in terms of user time saved through the services offered by the library, or benchmarking. According to Chung (2007:2), the time-value evaluation method is used to “measure and compare the relationships between time saved and costs avoided against the cost of library services”.

In this respect, special libraries serving an institution or commercial firm can measure:

- whether library services save time and effort in finding relevant information
- the time it would have taken the user to find the information without assistance from the library
- what information literacy is gained through training provided by the library staff (Poll 2007 n.d.).

Special libraries servicing a general public could measure their importance in the region, society or culture by asking both users and non-users to rate the direct benefit they get from library use, or the potential benefit they can derive from the existence of the library.

Benchmarking is defined as: “a process for improving performance by constantly identifying, understanding and adapting best practices and processes followed inside and outside the company and implementing the results” (Jurow and Barnard in Nicholas 2007:n.p). According to Poll (2007), measuring the quality of special library services depends on the mission of each library. For example, measurements for institutional special libraries concentrate on the speed, actuality and accuracy of the reference and information delivery services. Also important is whether services and collections can be accessed via the user’s desktop. Special libraries with long-range tasks and no specific population are measured by their specialized subject coverage, preservation and/or digitization activities, their engagement with cultural activities, and the comprehensiveness and speed with which bibliographies are prepared.

Poll (2007) identifies very specific performance indicators for special libraries. These indicators are based on the special tasks delivered by special libraries as outlined earlier in the chapter.

For libraries serving an undefined clientele, the immediate delivery of requested information is not as important as the quality of the collection for current and possible future demand.

Presently, very little benchmarking or value measuring activities are performed in African special libraries, providing them with little means to demonstrate that their work supports their institutional goals, and that ultimately the funds allocated to their service delivery will save costs for the institution. To demonstrate relevancy and worth, it is imperative that special libraries seize the opportunity to produce evidence-based measurements demonstrating their value in terms of stra-
tactic-level processes, i.e. by measuring what is needed to provide services and the impact of their information services on the business, geographic regions, strategic objectives, projects, and so on. The measurement and characterization of the user population in terms of size, location and needs is also necessary (Henczel 2007).

6.3 Information Communication Technologies

According to Muller (2007:118), users tend “to measure libraries according to how they utilize information technology to fulfill their needs”. Relevancy and the success of services are also measured according to the newness of the technology used. Many special libraries in Africa are embracing technology as a way to create a presence outside their physical buildings; however, the issues of sufficient capacity and affordable broadband hamper digital service delivery and the creation and maintenance of a web presence. Additionally, Mutula (n.d) points out that IT is not currently effectively integrated in the development agenda of most African countries, as can be seen from the lack of ICT policies.

Mutula (n.d.) warns that if the “digital divide” – a situation where disparities exist between countries and communities in terms ICT access – is not addressed, information service delivery will suffer, resulting in the under-utilization of information resources and information sharing. Current national initiatives in many countries are aiming to bridge this divide, and it is therefore in each institution’s (and this includes libraries’) interest to develop programs that correspond with national initiatives in order to address the situation.

6.4 Designing demand driven information systems

According to Mchombu (2007), collections in most information centers reflect the subject profiles of the information collection developers and are thus not based on real needs and demands. Special librarians are also often surrounded by legacy collections, systems and processes that require a concerted effort to maintain, often resulting in information systems that are not supportive of the core functions of the library (Henczel 2007). Mchombu (2007) advocates the use of user studies to design information systems that are demand driven and accurately reflect the need for information. Given the paucity of information resources, African special librarians should seize every opportunity they can to build relevant collections or provide access to applicable sources, whether in print, digital or any other appropriate format. In this respect, information sharing could play an important role, as it ensures that information is made available beyond the boundaries of a physical building, thus adding value to society as a whole.

6.5 Acquiring new skills

The Internet has resulted in the increased independence of the user from an intermediary, threatening the existence of librarians as the custodians of information.
In order to turn this into an opportunity, special librarians need to reinvent their roles as “filters” of data. New skills, such as the ability to do web authoring, mapping and navigation of the digital information landscape, the ability to handle dynamic resources, and contributing towards knowledge management within the parent organization; should be obtained (Wittwer 2001). Communication has become an important skill, with special librarians having to move both the information and themselves outside physical boundaries by means of technology and through the development of informal information networks within their parent organizations. Librarians have to be able to determine what projects their clients are involved in, and to connect the client proactively to relevant information (Muller 2007). The librarian therefore needs to create awareness amongst end-users of the range of information available and the quickest and easiest way to access the required information. This means that the role of trainer must be assumed – training end-users in best practices in Internet searching, and/or exposing them to other relevant information tools or products. Special librarians should thus not only gain traditional skills, but also new skills that deal with IT-techniques or IT-knowledge (Wittwer 2001).

6.6 Marketing

Special libraries have many of the same marketing and promotional needs as other libraries. However, special libraries often have a more narrowly defined set of users and must often compete with other departments for funding and information resources (Berry, 1999).

A number of African corporate libraries have in recent years been downsized, closed or outsourced due to a lack of funding or managerial support, with management justifying their withdrawal by comparing the running cost of the library service to “free” information services offered through the Internet (Muller 2007). The diverse avenues available for information access today have become a critical challenge to the survival of the special library, as users may now be prompted to use electronic or commercial document delivery services, subscribe to databases, buy their own materials, or use abbreviated online abstracts instead of full-text documents for their research (Nkanga 1999). These myriad options available to the client are currently challenging the very survival of special libraries, more so within the African context where special libraries are securing less and less funding to ensure that their information sources remain relevant.

According to Singh (2006), the customer and satisfying his/her needs should be the main reason for marketing, requiring sensitivity from staff towards customer needs, and an understanding from staff that it is their responsibility to fulfill these needs.
7. CONCLUSION

Despite being the oldest library type established in Africa, African special libraries are probably the most challenged libraries on the continent in terms of their ability to provide relevant services and resources to their clientele. Since their very survival depends on their ability to provide tailor-made services to their clients, it is imperative that they move with the times.

In the quest for relevance, the biggest challenge faced by the special libraries is probably inadequate ICT infrastructure, hardware and software, as well as a shortage of trained staff and technicians. ICTs have revolutionized the way in which information is retrieved and disseminated and how services to clients are provided. Because the use of technology is an indicator to the client of the library’s ability to deliver relevant information services, special libraries cannot afford to be found wanting. It will, however, take a concerted effort from many role-players in the information industry, such as governments, information service providers, IT technicians, managers of parent organizations, and library staff; to address all the issues and challenges related to information service delivery for Africa to be on par with the services delivered in developed countries.

Library schools need to address shortcomings in their training of library staff, specifically in the field of IT. It is no longer acceptable to concentrate the training of students on mainly theoretically based subjects when hands-on experience is paramount in providing them with a competitive edge in a fast moving, increasingly globalized world. The lack of continuous training facilities and courses have been identified as major shortcomings that need to be addressed by library schools, as the dynamic business environment necessitates the learning of new skills and the ability to adapt to existing systems. Currently, special librarians have to find their own way in order to try and keep their skills current.

The lack of benchmarking activities poses a serious problem to African special libraries, as it means that they have no measures in place to show their worth to their parent organizations. This provides them with no influence when negotiating for funding in order to obtain new services or the installation of ICTs within the library. This lack of tangible evidence often leads to special libraries being neglected, scaled down or even closed down.

On the positive side, it appears as if there is a growing consensus amongst special librarians that networking and resource sharing provides a workable solution to the paucity of information sources, and there is growing evidence that more libraries are forming both formal and informal networks of collaboration, not only amongst themselves, but also with other library types and even with libraries abroad.

Globalization necessitates that special libraries should become more aggressive market players, staying in the forefront of developments in their field of speciali-
zation, changes in their parent organizations, and innovations in the field of information delivery. African special libraries will have to find ways of overcoming their challenges in order to emerge as the suppliers of vibrant competitive services that add value to their employers.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Special librarians should make a concerted effort to market both themselves and the services that they offer. Users are not prone to use services just because a given facility is available in their organization. Proactive marketing alerts should prompt users to utilize that which is convenient, relevant and easily available.

2. All special libraries should embark on benchmarking activities, as this provides them with an insight into the value and productivity of their services, and also provides them with tangible evidence that can be used during negotiations with clients and the parent organizations. It can also indicate to staff where improvements need to be implemented.

3. Inadequate ICT infrastructure, hardware and software, training, and policies should be addressed at all levels, and librarians and their parent organizations should become actively involved in negotiations with their governments to find solutions to many of the problems still nagging the information industry in Africa. As governments are made more aware of the economic and social importance of information, they will possibly allocate more funds towards the improvement of infrastructure.

4. Training issues should be addressed, as the production of librarians with irrelevant skills is a bad reflection on the curricula of African library schools.

References


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