Charting the transformation of library and information services

Archie L Dick

University of Pretoria

Corresponding author

Archie L Dick, Professor, Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria, Lynnwood Road, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa, 0002.

archie.dick@up.ac.za

Abstract

A charter cannot transform library and information services without political champions, public pressure, norms and standards, legislation, and a transformed mind-set.

Keywords

Can a charter transform library and information services (LIS)? The experience of a country with inherited LIS disparities and growing socio-economic inequality suggests that a charter is not enough. South Africa celebrates twenty years of democracy in 2014, yet it remains a country with a Gini coefficient – a commonly used measure of inequality – that is among the highest in the world. A transformation charter for LIS requires therefore also political champions, public pressure, norms and standards, legislation, and a transformed mind-set.

The National Department of Arts and Culture, in collaboration with the National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS), in 2008 tasked a team of library professionals, academics, and policy development experts to develop a Library Transformation Charter (LTC). The charter process has its source in the idea of participatory development in policy formulation, enacted in the South African Constitution (Act no. 108 of 1996). The rationale is that the views of members of the public should inform decisions that will affect their lives. As a result, there are already charters for the Petroleum and Liquid Fuels Industry, the Mining sector, and the Heritage sector, among others.

In this spirit, and through a consultative process with the public, the LIS sector, and other stakeholders, the LTC would address unevenness in distribution and quality, envisioning a transformed LIS landscape. Unevenness across the country's libraries is not just about geographical distribution. It includes levels of funding, quality of service, degree of IT support, the qualifications of LIS professionals, and so forth. The writers of the LTC recognized the "protocols and patterns of investigation of other sector-specific charters produced by the government", but shaped this charter to suit the special features of the LIS sector (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: 11).

Their assignment was to define the key challenges facing the LIS sector and to provide a framework that would help to eliminate illiteracy, eradicate inequality in the sector, promote social cohesion, and build an informed and reading nation (Nkondo 2011). After public consultations in all nine provinces, a review of relevant literature and documentation, presentations of drafts to the Minister of Arts and Culture and

the Minister of Education, to NCLIS, to its own reference team of consultants and key LIS stakeholders, and to a National Summit, a sixth draft of the LTC was produced in July 2009.

Since then, the LTC has been accessible to the general public and the LIS sector via the websites of the Department of Arts and Culture, the National Library of South Africa (NLSA), and the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA). After further consultation with government officials, a seventh and final draft was prepared and will be available in early 2014. Adopting a developmental model, the LTC is sensitive to its socio-economic context and to UNESCO's Millennium Development Goals. It emphasizes education and development information, and recognizes that LIS provide intellectual, cultural, and social spaces whether real or virtual (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: xviii-ix).

How this charter will transform South Africa's LIS sector remains unclear. Events in the past few years point to the need for auxiliary transformation agents if the charter hopes to live up to its aspirations. First is the need for political champions. The historical record shows that the most meaningful changes in library services in South Africa resulted from the intervention of high-ranking government officials. Lord Charles Somerset, as Governor of the Cape, established the South African Public Library in 1818, and Colonial Secretary John Molteno's regulations in 1874 provided subsidies to subscription libraries and reading rooms that led to wider public access. More recently, Pallo Jordan during his term as Minister of Arts and Culture in a democratic government drove many library initiatives, which led to the LTC and other significant changes underway in the LIS sector.

The same quality of commitment is absent today at these tiers of government. NCLIS, which is appointed to advise the Minister of Arts and Culture, struggles for an audience with the minister. And the likelihood that all advisory councils may be restructured in the future will widen the gap between the LIS sector and the political levers of transformation. The LTC becomes especially crucial in these circumstances through its calls for norms and standards, and for new legislation. The need for norms and standards is felt most acutely in the school library sub-sector, where more than 90% of public schools have no libraries.

Only sustained public and media pressure on the Minister of Basic Education, who is responsible for the country's public schools, resulted in the publication of regulations on norms and standards in November 2013. Among other things, the regulations require a specific focus on the norms and standards relating to libraries, and these norms and standards "must be implemented within ten years from the date of publication of the regulations" (Regulations relating to minimum uniform norms and standards for public school infrastructure, 2013).

This gives cause for celebration, but what South African library professionals should now do is to exercise a social responsibility obligation that connects school library improvements with other urgent school problems. "Almost 2,500 [public schools] have no water supply, 46% still use pit latrines and 913 have no toilets at all" (Phakathi, 2013). These facts necessitate a spirit of collaboration by librarians with social movements that pressure government for access to basic public education services. It is this transformed mind-set that the LTC expects will achieve sensitivity to wider socio-economic contexts of LIS in South Africa.

Legislation features prominently in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation plans of the LTC (The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter, 2009: 93-101). The most pleasing LTC development is therefore the progress with the implementation of the South African Public Library and Information Services Bill. This bill establishes norms and standards for the delivery of standardized public library and information services in all nine provinces of the country. Investigations are underway to cost the implications of implementing the proposed legislation before it is submitted to Parliament. From progress reports, a clear picture is emerging of how many and what types of libraries are needed in the provinces. The emphasis is on their physical distribution in order to improve access by the public.

This legislation will go a long way to redress imbalances, to establish the proper assignment of functions, and to reverse the under-prioritization of a funded mandate. It will phase out conditional grants that are still necessary to fund public library services, and when the norms and standards for school libraries are implemented relations between these sub-sectors will gradually normalize. The transformation of library and information services cannot rely on a charter alone, but charting transformation together will bring success.

References

The Library and Information Services Transformation Charter. Available at: https://www.dac.gov.za/sites/default/files/Transformation%20charter-6th%20draft-22102009.pdf (Accessed 7 December 2013).

Nkondo, M (2011) LIS Transformation Charter. Powerpoint presentation to the Select Committee on Education and Recreation, 16 February, 2011.

Phakathi, B (2013) Too many   loopholes in school standards, says DA. Available at: http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/education/2013/12/02/too-many-loopholes-in-school-standards-says-da (Accessed 5 December 2013).

Regulations Relating To Minimum Uniform Norms And Standards For Public School Infrastructure, 29 November 2013. Available at:

http://www.education.gov.za/Newsroom/MediaReleases/tabid/347/ctl/Details/mid/2327/ItemID/3862/Default.aspx (Accessed 5 December 2013).