

# *COMLA – The Contribution to Librarianship in the Developing World*

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COMLA is a viable Commonwealth Professional Association with an influential voice in international library relations. The actual setting of COMLA took place when a group of librarians from Commonwealth countries met in the humid atmosphere at Lagos in November 1972. The founders of COMLA felt that the concept of the Commonwealth still had a meaning and that the large number of developing country members within the Commonwealth who felt uneasy at IFLA would have a much greater say in the Association they were conceiving. Two main features of COMLA have remained intact over the years: the sense of a worldwide camaraderie's and the strong desire of the Association, to keep the poor but deserving association, institution or even individual. COMLA was established with 20 founding Member Library Associations. Today there are over 52 member organizations, 40 National Library Associations, and 12 National Library Institutions in countries where an association has not been formed. Further there are over 130 Affiliations (Commonwealth) and Newsletter subscribers (Non Commonwealth) embracing various libraries and a few individual members.

## **Objectives of COMLA**

One of the most important objectives for which COMLA has striven from the outset has been the creation and fostering of library associations in all Commonwealth countries.

A comparison of the situation in 2002 with that in 1972 would indicate that many library associations have been born in the interval. COMLA also encourages member Associations, even tiny ones, to organize themselves more efficiently and thus become more dynamic. The general council of COMLA would initiate programs of both pan-Commonwealth and regional projects and activities aimed at examining and solving the problems faced by a good number of its members in nurturing their Associations. The role played by library associations according to COMLA can be stated as follows. They

bring together librarians providing them with an opportunity for inter-communication of ideas through conferences, congress, symposia and workshops and their publications.

COMLA's other objectives are to forge, maintain and strengthen professional links between Librarians; to promote the status and education of librarians and the reciprocal recognition of their qualifications; to initiate research projects designed to promote library provision and to further the technical development of libraries in the Commonwealth; and to effect improvement in the library infrastructure in countries leading to improved access for all.

Above all these COMLA stands for another objective as evident from its resolution as approved by the general council at its meeting held in Ottawa, October 1988; , This meeting urges the developed Commonwealth governments to consider granting enhanced aid through their international aid agencies and through the Commonwealth and allied inter government agencies to the developing countries to be specifically used for the development of libraries and library related information systems. It lays special emphasis on the developed countries to assist in and facilitate the extension of automated information services in developing countries and the development of relevant services so vital for providing information for development '.

COMLA also aims at promoting the activities of such international organizations having UNESCO and IFLA support. For example the UAP (Universal Availability of Publications) should be of greater interest to COMLA members. Its objective is complementary to the aims of COMLA which seeks among other things 'to improve libraries within the Commonwealth'. The above COMLA aims can have important bearing on the improvement of access and availability since the improvement of libraries and library provision will result in improvements in the library infrastructure of countries, leading to improved access for all. COMLA's aim to promote the status and education of librarians also coincides with the recognition given to the importance of professional education for those participating in activities relating to UAP.

Another area in which COMLA members can help is in emphasizing the importance of planning at the national level for the development of library and information services. In some countries initiatives have been successfully made by library associations to develop such plans .In many others, this remains to do done and it seems

that COMLA can be of immense value in ensuring the ready availability and accessibility of publications by encouraging member associations to develop such plans for submission to their governments.

### **First Decade of COMLA'S Growth**

COMLA completed 10 years of growth in 1982 and it has had varied fortunes over the years. As K. C. Harrison, the founder President of COMLA claims COMLA Newsletter has undoubtedly been one of the successes of the Association and it appeared very regularly to the satisfaction of all members. The first decade was also marked with numerous grants, which have been made out of COMLA money to assist seminars, conference and projects. COMLA has also influenced a number of other grants made directly by the Commonwealth Foundation.

In the first ten years of its growth, COMLA can also claim to have influenced and encouraged the formation of library associations in many Commonwealth countries which did not have them before 1972. Among the new library associations are Mauritius, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Lesotho, Malawi and others. When considering the membership enrolment COMLA has had partial success. Another success recognized as such by the Foundation and other outside bodies, has been the publication of the training modules for non-professional library staff. There have been also been some other useful side effects. Through the medium of professional centers, librarians have been brought into much closer with the other professions. This is quite evident in such member countries such as UK, Jamaica, Kenya, Fiji and Singapore. COMLA'S connection with IFLA, the British Council and the Commonwealth Relations Trust (CRT) has bestowed many advantages to Commonwealth librarianship. The CRT has been instrumental in granting bursaries to Commonwealth librarians to undertake study tours in the UK. Librarians from such countries as Ghana, Barbados, Singapore, Cyprus and Uganda have visited UK in the first few years after its creation. COMLA has initiated a multitude of activities in the first decade of its existence and its efforts have been crowned with considerable success.

### **Second Decade**

The second decade of COMLA's existence saw the beginning of new trends and developments. The creation of Regional Councils in 1982 is one of the steps taken to strengthen corroborative activities in the regions and not to create new autonomous

organizations. COMLA as a global organization still survives and the Regional Councils would help COMLA to revitalize its activities by remaining in direct contact with Regional Vice Presidents. The first European Regional Council meeting was held in Nicosia in mid June 1982 and it was quite evident that COMLA through its regional councils, has pledged all possible technical advice in the implementation of its recommendations and it was up to all concerned to ensure that the initiative thus created is not allowed to fail. The subsequent establishment of the other regional councils of the Asian Region, Americas and the Caribbean, the South Pacific Region, the West African Region and the East, Central and South African Region was based on the same principles. One of the main objectives of COMLA from its very inception has been the creation and nurturing of library Associations in all Commonwealth countries. In the early years as well as in the recent times the presidents of COM LA have toured those countries which did not possess Library Associations and were able to convene meetings of local librarians to form such associations.

In 1988 the president of COMLA during her visit to Gambia was able to convene a meeting at which a Steering Committee was set to form a library association. Apart from the presidential tours, the General Council meetings, regional activities sponsored by COMLA and the informative function of the COMLA Newsletter created enthusiasm where previously there was apathy or even utter absence of thought on the need to organize locally the library profession. COMLA could also help to encourage member associations to organize themselves to be more efficient and dynamic. A few associations are barely alive and others monopolized by a small groups of members, others seem to need a constitutional structure that would enable even members in remote areas to play active roles. It has been a major force in the assertion of the importance and dignity of the profession COMLA will undoubtedly do more to assert them in the future, for the library profession is notoriously one that needs to be defended and asserted continuously, or else it is neglected and belittled.

### **Concept of Regionalization**

During the period 1982-1987 the concept of regionalization was implemented and efforts were made to transform COMLA from a highly centralized organization in to a decentralized one based on geographical and cultural regions. Why regionalization was

introduced? It was introduced primarily because of the increasing expenses of operating a highly centralized organization. The high costs and the difficulties involved in organizing General Council Meetings to be attended by all COMLA councilors dictated the change. With the setting up of the regional councils the need for a full-time secretariat was removed and responsibility was passed on to the Regional Vice President who had to play an active role in the affairs of COMLA. In spite of certain existing problems, some degree of success has been achieved and if not for certain conditions more beneficial results would have been accrued.

Regionalization can succeed when there is a commitment to the ideals of COMLA and where there is the belief that it has a valid role to play with the Commonwealth. The commitment must exist within member associations as well as within those who hold office, particularly at regional level i.e. Regional Vice Presidents and COMLA Councilors. If this kind of commitment prevails, many new and innovative ideas can be developed for the benefit of the profession within the region, inexpensive projects can be developed and implemented, staff exchanges or visits can be arranged more easily because of the contacts made and the collegial atmosphere which COMLA can foster within a region by breaking down the isolation of individuals operating independently. In one region concerted effort led to the enactment of long awaited library legislation and in another region a regional effort is being made to secure enactment of legal deposit legislation in the countries represented by member associations.

Certain disadvantages of having regional organizations can be turned to good advantage when it is used to provide opportunities for COMLA councilors or their representatives to meet at little or no expense to COMLA. This practice exists in several regions and it is held that an opportunity to meet face to face, at least for an hour or two, strengthens ties and builds professional affinities and friendships.

Another advantage of regionalization is that it emphasizes the need to raise funds internally within the region for projects. This has proved to be the most difficult success objective to achieve so far, but even here there has been some success. In one region funds have been provided to assist COMLA members to participate in continuing education programs such as conferences and seminars while in another region funding has been secured for projects within the region. It can be stated that COMLA provides a valid platform on which approaches to funding assistance can be made.

Regionalization, although it offers certain advantages, does present a potential barrier in the communication process.

Earlier each COMLA councilor had a direct link with the COMLA Secretariat. Regionalization encourages the routing of communications through the Regional Vice Presidents. The Regional Vice Presidents and elected officers who attend General Council meetings must however be aware of the barriers inherent in the regional structure and must ensure that they pass on the information to those whom they represent. Every COMLA councilor has also an obligation to keep the library association informed of the program and activities of COMLA, maintain a two-way flow of information between the associations and COMLA. An opportunity has to be given to COMLA councilors to report to the association on the activities and the progress of COMLA.

COMLA's major funding agency is the Commonwealth Foundation without which the association would find it extremely difficult to function as it does at present. Since 1983 the Foundation has adopted a rolling forward estimates system with the purpose of ensuring financial viability. It is now essential that COMLA develops effective forecasting of its budgetary needs for three years ahead. COMLA should make every endeavor to maintain the spirit of friendliness that now exists in its dealings with the Commonwealth Foundation. However on more than one occasion the Executive Committee of COMLA has emphasized on the need for the regions to be self sufficient financially since support from the Commonwealth Foundation as at present levels cannot be expected indefinitely. Member associations wherever possible is expected to approach their governments and commercial organizations for funding of COMLA activities.

There are suggestions on how to improve COMLA's presence in the regions. The present infrastructure with Regional Vice Presidents working with Presidents or Secretaries of various Library Associations has created certain difficulties. It is assumed that there is regular communication between them. While these should be so, the unfortunate state of circumstances where one is too busy or where communication links are not good results in Regional Vice Presidents receiving little or no response to his memos sent out and there is hardly any feed back for them. It is still regarded that 'tyranny of distance' continues to be an impediment in the efforts to strengthen and foster existing links between library associations in Commonwealth countries of several regions such as South Pacific and between these countries and the COMLA Executive. While

mail has been the main means of communication between COMLA members this is not adequate to meet the growing links, aspirations and challenges of the librarians in the region. In the regions there are governments and other International Aid Organizations particularly the International Development Research Center (IDRC), Canada, the Asia Foundation and JICA involved in the work towards improving and promoting librarianship and the work and contribution of these organizations and governments significantly overshadow COMLA assistance in the regions.

### **COMLA Secretariat**

There has been speculation over the location of the Secretariat. Most Commonwealth Professional Associations had their Secretariat in London, a location of great convenience. COMLA has the distinction of being among the first of the Commonwealth Professional Associations to locate its Secretariat in a developing country, The step was encouraged by the Commonwealth Foundation as part of its original purpose to reduce the present centralization in Britain. As far back as 1985 COMLA's Executive agreed that it would not consider a move to London. The problems caused by great distances between the President and Secretariat were also discussed at General Council meetings and it was agreed that the Secretariat should be located in the same country for at least the same region as the current COMLA president. Since July 1983 the Secretariat has been in Jamaica and Jamaican Library Association (JLA) has taken a keen interest to have the Secretariat relocated there . The burden of secretarial duties has be borne by a full time Executive Secretary and the advantages of having the President and the Executive Secretary in the same country or at least in the same region are numerous.

The view of the Commonwealth Foundation has always been as observed earlier is that Commonwealth Professional Association Secretariats should be located in developing countries. However if any of the other Commonwealth Library Association is willing to provide accommodation and other facilities for the location of the Secretariat such an offer should be accepted.

Regional re- organization has not proved as productive as was envisaged. One of the first steps taken by the COMLA General Council held in Nairobi in March 1983 was

the appointment of a Projects Committee to design Guidelines for the submission of Regional Projects in keeping with its policy of regional reorganization. Unfortunately, however, very few projects have been submitted to COMLA in spite of the encouragement given by the Regional Vice-Presidents from time to time. It has to be reiterated that viable projects are the main basis on which COMLA's performance is judged and all regions must be persuaded to submit them in good time and in accordance with the Guidelines drawn up by the Project Committee. Regional Vice Presidents should submit to the President proposals for small regional activities with budgets not Exceeding Sterling Pounds 500, sending copies to the Executive Secretary and Treasurer. It may be that the Executive Committee and Councilors need to take a more positive role in initiating projects and sharing administrative responsibilities more widely. The infrastructure for fruitful growth is already laid; the harvest depends on the enthusiasm and support of individual members of the Executive committee and Council.

### **General Council and Executive Committee**

Meeting of COM LA General Councils and Executive Committees have also become forums for the discussion of topics that have been engaging many Commonwealth librarians for years and some useful and relevant topics have been the title of such seminars. The publication of the proceedings of COMLA seminars should prove to be of great help to many COMLA librarians. Moreover the Executive Committee and the Regional Council will undoubtedly devote attention to the seminar resolutions that would be taken at the conclusion of the seminar. Similarly the reports on workshops conducted by the Commonwealth Secretariat from time to time on current issues have proved to be of great importance. Follow up workshops and seminars on connected themes have been planned by COMLA to coincide with the General Council meetings. It will be noted from the overview of recent events that COMLA is developing a continuity of theme, directed towards meeting the needs of the majority of its member the smaller Library Associations in the developing Commonwealth. The practice of planning of General Council meetings in association with IFLA conference and other activities will reduce costs to COMLA and the practice has to be continued.

COMLA however very much appreciates its member's contribution as those from

Jamaican Library Association (JLA) and Library Association (Britain). It is these that enable COMLA to comply with the new policies recently adopted by its sponsoring body, the Commonwealth Foundation, by reducing administrative costs. Between 1981-1984, important changes were made in the status and mandate of the Commonwealth Foundation. The effect on more than 20 Commonwealth Professional Associations with which COMLA is associated under the aegis of the Foundation is that to qualify for support all are now required annually to show financial viability and capacity for mounting practical programs to promote Commonwealth cooperation in their respective fields. The rolling forward estimate which now prevails enables the Foundation to measure the performance of each Commonwealth Professional Association as often as every six months. Like the others, COMLA has to present a detailed budget each year, covering the following three years at a time. The system requires development of effective forecasting skills by the all members of Commonwealth Professional Associations. COMLA needs to undertake this effectively without delay to ensure successful regionalization of its activities.

### **COMLA Newsletter**

The role played by the COMLA Newsletter should not be underestimated. Since 1973, COMLA Newsletter has appeared very regularly and all members and its many readers appreciate the newsy material it contains. COMLA Vice President on more than one occasion have deplored the failure of the Regional Councilors to contribute articles, news etc. to the COMLA News letter. For the COMLA Newsletter to continue to function effectively and meaningfully it must have feedback which can be both edifying and critical. It has become the fuel which helps to keep the COMLA flame continuously aflame. It can be stated that the COMLA Newsletter has attained an independent personality, with the publication of several original articles in each issue. Sometimes they are built around a theme, while at other time they reflect the broad range of interest of the member of COMLA. The COMLA Newsletter could serve its purpose better if regional Vice Presidents keep in touch with the Secretariat by providing news items as well as original articles. It has continued to be the Association's most vital link with its members always continuing a happy blend of news items and in-depth studies and reports of current professional interest. In keeping with the wish of the Commonwealth Foundation

that responsibilities should rotate increasingly round the Commonwealth, other member Library Associations should come forward to take over the responsibility for its editorship and it is the Newsletter which keeps the COMLA family together.

### **Awards and Fellowships**

As stated earlier one of the primary aims of COMLA is to promote the status and education of librarians and the reciprocal recognition of qualifications in librarianship. There are awards granted under the Commonwealth Foundation Programs designed to promote deeper understanding of Commonwealth affairs and commitment to Commonwealth ideals. The traveling fellowships aim to develop the knowledge and commitment of the fellows by undertaking an approved piece of work, study, demonstration, innovation, research or experiment in the field. Opportunity should also be given to those who seek professional development through job exchange at libraries of the developed Commonwealth by a continuous process of co-ordination. The other types of awards are those offered in memory of eminent personalities which enable a new library and information science professional from a country where librarianship is in an early stage of development to study a specific subject of his or her choice in one or more Western European Countries. COMLA is in an advantageous position of receiving grants and awards from several sources and every endeavor should be made to publicize them expeditiously in such a way that no one is seriously disadvantaged.

The present constitution of COMLA gives pride of place to the Regional Vice Presidents. The COMLA Executive Committee authorizes the convening of such Commonwealth and regional conferences as it thinks desirable and financially practical. The responsibility to determine activities and initiate projects devolves upon the regional vice presidents and councilors. The regional Vice President is the Chairman of the regional council and is its representative in the COMLA executive committee as well as in the general council. The Regional Vice Presidents also plays a vital role as the link with other regional councils through communication with the executive committee and the executive secretariat. The extent of regional activities much depends on his initiative and capability. The regional council with enthusiastic vice presidents, will forge ahead while others will lag behind. As such all regional councils did not have the same success

in developing their own activities. Can we make any provisions in the constitution to empower the executive committee to initiate projects in regions where regional projects have slackened?

### **Conclusion**

As COMLA is 36 years old now it has become an occasion to pause and take stocks. During this period all efforts were made to transform COMLA from a highly centralized organization into a decentralized one based on geographical regions. Some degree of success has been achieved no doubt but there are some factors to be taken into consideration. There should be more commitment within member associations and within those who hold office to the ideals of COMLA. Only in such an environment within the regions self financing projects can be developed and implemented. Staff exchanges, attachments or visits can be arranged more easily and collegial atmosphere be created. Regionalization does present a potential barrier in the communication process. Communication is more difficult because COMLA nor the employing institutions have the money to enable its members to meet as often as they would like. It is also desirable that the location of the COMLA Secretariat rotates and member library associations should offer to host the Secretariat at least for a period of four years.

Regional reorganization has not been successful as was envisaged and it may be that the executive committee and councilors need to take a more positive role in initiating projects and sharing administrative responsibilities more widely. During the past three decades the frame work has been solidly laid: the reaping of a good harvest depends on the enthusiasm and commitment of individual members of the COMLA Executive and Council.

COMLA is an association of Associations and its progress depends on each one of us. However it has maintained its most cherished characteristic: its potential for developing close ties of fellowship between individual professionals from widely differing backgrounds and cultures.

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