The National Library of Uganda: its inception, challenges and prospects

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Background

- The population of 28.3 million
- Annual growth rate of 3.2%
- Birth rate is 6.9%
- Literacy rate is 69%
- Poor reading culture
- Most books are published in English
- Most people do not know how to read and write in English - the official language
- The publishing industry is not well developed
- Out of 82 districts, only 29 have public libraries most of them in rented dilapidated, nonfunctional buildings
History

- By 1923 there were some small private libraries for European expatriates e.g. The Uganda Society Library at Entebbe
- Public Libraries Act, 1964 whose aim to establish public libraries in all districts
- There was the Public Libraries Board headquarters, 4 regional libraries and 16 branch libraries operating book box, mobile and postal library services

History cont... 

- Library services deteriorated
- In the late 1960s two (2) commissions of inquiries came out with recommendations but no action was taken.
- From mid 1960s to mid 1970s, there were two (2) development plans to build the Uganda National Library, but this did not materialize
History cont…

- 1971 – military coup.
- 1972 – Expulsion of Asians and expatriates which leading to more deterioration of library services
- Ban on importation of books and censorship on local publications
- 1979 – Liberation war, some public library buildings were destroyed and books looted
- 1986 – NRM government, reopened and rehabilitated public library buildings

History cont…

- Makerere University College (Deposit Library) Act, 1964 and Deposit Library and Documentation Centre Act, 1969 required Makerere University Library (MULIB) and the Deposit Library and Documentation Centre (DLDC) to collect and preserve the national imprint.
- Acts are weak, obsolete and operating without a library policy
- Publishers unwilling to deposit their books
- Uganda National Bibliography irregular and ceased in 1987
**Research questions**

- What was the motivation of the politicians and professionals that led to the institutionalization of NLU?
- What were the activities of the politicians and professionals during the process of the institutional change from the PLB to NLU?
- Which were the environmental changes and challenges that occurred in the library and information sector as a result of the institutionalization of the NLU?

**Theory**

Theory cont...


Methods

- Qualitative research
- In-depth face to face interviews
- Open-ended interview schedule
- Documents: reports, minutes of meetings and the Hansard
- Observation of the state of NLU and public libraries
Method cont…

Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Libraries Board/National Library of Uganda</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makerere University Library</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposit Library and Documentation Centre</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda Library and Information Association</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda Publishers Association</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East African School of Library and Information Science</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Libraries</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Why was the NLU established?
- Decentralization of the public libraries
- Implementing the development plans of the 1960s and 1970s
- MULIB and DLDC were ineffective as legal depositories
- There was a need for a coordinating body to supervise public libraries
- A national library of a country is a nation’s pride
- PLB staff were going to be retrenched
Results cont…

What was the process?

- PLB staff wrote a concept paper, approved by the NLU Board and the cabinet
- National Library Bill, 2001 drafted and discussed in the Social Services Committee (SSC) by the stakeholders
- There was concern:
  - booksellers, authors and users were not represented in the Committee
  - PLB initiated the process and did not involve other stakeholders

Results cont…

- This would have been an opportunity to revise the MULIB and DLDC Acts

Suggestions rejected by the SSC

- MULIB to become the second national library
- Transferring all the legal deposit documents, including theses and dissertations from MULIB to NLU
- Transferring the copyright office from the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs to NLU
Results Cont…

- Debate in Parliament
  Members of Parliament were concerned about:
  - lack of reading culture
  - poor state of public libraries
  - lack of government support to public libraries
  - Absence of library policy
  - Lack of current relevant books
  - Low literacy rate
  - Absence of public libraries in most district

Results cont…

- MPs preferred
  - The NL Bill to be called the Public Library Bill
  - The public libraries to be directly under the NLU and not decentralized
- They supported the Bill and the National Library Act came into effect in January 2003
Results Cont…

- Challenges that occurred after the establishment of the NLU
  - Some local authorities received public libraries with reservation, others rejected them and others scrambled for them
  - No budget for the decentralized public libraries and no salaries for six months
  - Unqualified staff in public libraries were retrenched and plans are under way to recruit qualified librarians

Results cont…

- Challenges cont…

- The NLU is under MoGLSD while the public libraries which it coordinates in under MoLG
- Public libraries are under different departments
  - Kampala – Education Information and Sports
  - Mbale – Community and social services
  - Teso – Education and sports
  - Masindi – Town clerk
- NLU nearly evicted due to nonpayment of rent in arrears
Results cont…

- Challenges cont..
  - NLU staff need orientation in national library services
  - Lack of funds, functional building, qualified staff, government support, transport to collect the national imprint, mechanism to implement the NLU Act especially the publishers who refuse to deposit books
  - NLU is unknown by the general public

Results cont…

- Challenges Cont…
  - Collection of photographs, audio-visual materials cannot be done due to lack of storage and preservation facilities
  - NLU has no Board, the decision making body. There is no recruitment, disciplining, promoting of staff.
Results cont…

- Achievements
  - In conjunction with development partners
    - Book mobile project: books given to rural primary schools thus increasing the reading culture (World Bank, Anywhere Books)
    - School library project: locally published books donated by NLU to primary schools
    - The National Book Trust of Uganda (NABOTU) the NLU and SIDA organize national book week festivals in public and community libraries.

Results cont…

- Achievements cont…
  - Soroti District Council with NLU completed the office block and childrens’ wing of the Teso public library which had stalled since 1968
  - Plans are under way to construct functional library buildings in Gulu, Lira and Moroto districts
  - NLU has procured books from Book Aid International and distributed them to several public libraries
Results cont..

- Achievements cont…
  - NLU offers technical, material and professional support to the community based organizations wishing to set up community libraries
  - Local governments with the assistance of the American Embassy have installed Internet services in three public libraries, thus adding value to these libraries and attracting more users.

Results cont..

- Achievements cont…
  - Land has been identified to build for the NLU and architectural design is in place
  - NLU trained librarians from community and public libraries
Results Cont…

- Achievements cont..
  - NLU is part of the PERI/INASP program and users have access to international databases
  - The National Bibliography of Uganda has been published annually since 2005 and there is hope to increase its frequency as the publishing industry grows and the depositing of books improves
  - NLU has successfully hosted international conferences: SCESAL XVI and copyright and access to information

Conclusion

- The establishment of the NLU is a welcome initiative and a national pride where the national intellectual out-put is collected and easily accessible. Although it has registered some success, it has a lot of challenges some going as far back as the 1960s.
- However, with the commitment of the government, the library and information science professionals, politicians and development partners, many of these challenges, it is hoped, will be solved.
Thank you