
The Southern African Cultural Information System (SACIS)

A.P.N. Thapisa

The author

A.P.N. Thapisa is Head of Department of Library and Information Studies at the University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *Library Management*.

Abstract

Describes the development of the Southern African Cultural Information System (SACIS), a project spearheaded by the Southern African Development Community (SADC). A substantial and effective information system is considered essential for disseminating messages about and facilitating the implementation of economic development projects and policies in African states. Charts the development of the SACIS including its objectives, funding and implementation.

Introduction

The Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC) was reconstituted in August 1992 as the Southern African Development Community (SADC). With this development came a renewed determination to launch and consolidate an infrastructure that is designed to deliver an effective implementation of economic programmes. This development also saw the partitioning of SADC's Cultural and Information Sector whose main purpose is to meet the challenges of facilitating regional co-operation and integration. SADC needed to chart a new course, one that places information and culture on top of its agenda. The Culture and Information Sector therefore is expected to play a key role in disseminating messages and facilitating the implementation of projects and policies. SADC, as an instrument for regional development and co-ordination, could not see itself effecting that role without a substantial and effective information system. Sustainable development and economic growth could not possibly be achieved where culture and information are ignored. The availability of information is useful in explaining the necessity and implications of development projects, policies and strategies because of its capacity to motivate people to work towards the fulfilment of shared visions, goals, objectives and destinies in a regional economy. People need to be informed about their histories, values, cultures and traditions which they hold in common, or share. Well managed information systems therefore support communication which is essential for development, while, on the other hand, culture provides the background against which development strategies must be planned. Against this setting SADC observed that the right to information constitutes one of the fundamental human rights enshrined in the Charter of the Human Rights. Even so, it was abundantly clear that there is insufficient information in SADC about SADC, its activities and idiosyncrasies of its component states. The communication infrastructure itself is underdeveloped and, where it bears semblance of development, it serves the exclusive interests of the urban elite (C.I.S.-SADC/2.OC/92-4.1-en).

SADC's programme for regional co-operation in information was perceived to include the following principles:

- (1) Enhanced consciousness and appreciation of the region's contribution to human advancement and development.
- (2) Promotion of people-to-people contacts and co-operation by exploiting cultural links and affinities, shared values and aspirations.
- (3) Promotion of collective self-reliance in the production of information.
- (4) Enhanced perceptions and implementation of development in the region.

The Culture and Information Sector was designed therefore to guarantee the contribution of information and culture in the process of regional co-ordination, integration and development.

Objectives

The overall policy, aims and priorities of the Culture and Information Sector are to:

- (1) Promote a greater and better knowledge of SADC and its member states at regional and international level.
- (2) Promote a regional identity.
- (3) Promote and contribute to the definition of regional integration and development strategies.
- (4) Promote co-operation in the fields of information systems and computer technologies.
- (5) Encourage freedom of the press in line with the Windhoek Declaration.

In order to promote a better understanding of SADC, priority will be given to:

- freeing the flow of information through multimedia sources such as films, videos, oral and written word;
- developing an effective and efficient communication infrastructure;
- enhancing the role of the social media in the promotion of international understanding as well as peace, progress, human rights and democratic ideals;
- enhancing the training of journalists and other media professionals and practitioners.
- promoting the use of information to complement the development process;
- promoting a more balanced dissemination of information that does not impede the freedom of speech;
- promoting pluralism of information that does not suppress the existence of multiple and autonomous initiatives regarding the

ownership and operation of the mass media.

These objectives were designed to enhance the flow of information within the region. In recognition of this, it was noted that the free flow of information could not be achieved without guaranteeing the free movement of journalists and other media practitioners in the region. In this regard, it would be necessary to reduce, or exempt them from payment of telecommunication tariffs in accordance with the international agreements and conventions already signed by SADC member states.

To promote the joint production and exchange of knowledge and information, optimised regional resources and standardised procedures, regional experts and professionals are expected to:

- develop relevant professional and technical reports;
- encourage the annual collection of national bibliographies;
- reinforce existing professional associations and foster the creation of new ones;
- promote meetings, seminars, workshops and professional conferences for regular exchange of ideas, views, innovations, planning and review; and
- ensure the financing of institutional support for each country to implement programmes and activities of regional interest.

Indubitably, one of the inhibiting factors against the dissemination of information about and within SADC, is the low level of the communication infrastructure. Where print media are concerned the situation is exacerbated by the non-availability of raw materials (notably newsprint), costly production, poor circulation networks resulting from either poor transport networking, or a lack of transport, and limited capacity due to illiteracy and poverty. In order to develop a communication infrastructure it is envisaged that SADC states will:

- give priority to the development of radio and also special attention to the establishment of television in their respective countries;
- ensure that the establishment of viable radio and television communication systems goes hand in hand with that of telecommunications;

- mobilise national, regional and international funds for the development of communication infrastructure;
- encourage closer co-operation among the media institutions to optimise the use of available resources;
- explore ways of synchronising media technologies within the region in order to allow for easier access to, and sharing of, both the technology and technological experts;
- assess the possibility of investing in a regional newsprint and paper industry to facilitate the greater production of materials crucial to the operations of the print media and book production within the region.

An urgent need was articulated to develop research programmes and studies aimed at finding out the value of traditional communication methods and to assess the socio-cultural impact of the new communication technologies. Such research would be able to establish:

- the extent to which the new communication technology meets the communities' abilities to assimilate the information disseminated to them;
- the extent to which applied technologies take into account the cultural identities of the societies in which they are used, and determine the impact of the media and of the new communication technologies on the societies, their cultures and cultural identities.

Funding

Financing the activities of the Culture and Information Sector was seen as a very serious problem and strategies were suggested to circumvent it. The Ministers of Information and Culture recommended that:

- member states should define in their financial policies, priorities for investment in the areas of information and culture;
- member states should adopt fiscal and customs measures favourable to the areas of information and culture including the development of enabling laws;
- the development of programmes and projects should foresee financial demands for the implementation of studies and analyses of their social impact (C.I.S.-SADC/2.OC/92-4.1-en).

Implementation

A Meeting of Experts, sponsored by UNESCO, was held in Lusaka, Zambia, on the 19-21 June 1995 to consider the establishment of a Data Bank for Culture in SADC. This was a follow-up of the 1992 meeting of the Council of Ministers which approved the establishment of a sub-regional Data Bank for Culture which encompassed the setting up of a coherent system of collecting, processing and exchanging cultural information. The Culture and Information Sector (established in Maputo) had contacted UNESCO requesting its assistance in carrying out a feasibility study concerning the project. It should be noted also that in 1993 at the 27th session of its General Conference, UNESCO recognised the necessity of establishing an international cultural information system as a means of implementing the objectives of the World Decade for Cultural Development. To this end UNESCO had decided to:

- support the organisation of regional expert meetings; and
- assist with the creation of regional databases on cultural development in Africa.

A feasibility study for a network for cultural information in Southern Africa was undertaken in January 1995 within the framework of the general information programme of UNESCO. This study discovered that:

- (1) Cultural information is mostly handled in national archives, libraries, research centres, universities, NGOs galleries, museums and within professional associations.
- (2) Most institutions dealing with culture had an acute shortage of suitably trained personnel.
- (3) There was a shortage of space for processing and storage of collections due to budgetary constraints.
- (4) Computerisation of information was under way but with insufficient standardisation schemes and thus impeding efficient co-operation among professionals.
- (5) Institutions virtually worked on their own without co-operating with others.
- (6) Information dissemination was inefficient with the result that potential users could not easily have access to it.
- (7) There is nevertheless a greater potential for networking.

The participants at the Meeting of Experts, as mentioned above, unanimously agreed to the launching of both the national cultural information networks and the regional cultural information network integrating the existing databases and information sources. They recommended that such a body should be called the Southern African Cultural Information System (SACIS) and that the project/unit should be based within the SADC Culture and Information Sector which is co-ordinated by Mozambique in Maputo (SADC/CI/CM/95/2.1.4a).

The Meeting of Experts also established the following main objectives of the regional network for cultural information as being to:

- (1) Create a regional network for cultural information as an efficient instrument of designing, implementing and evaluating cultural development policies, programmes and institutions.
- (2) Strengthen endogenous cultural development.
- (3) Mobilise cultural resources in view of economic development at the national level.
- (4) Ensure a better integration of the cultural dimension in development strategies and programmes.
- (5) Establish a programme of policies, strategies and priorities in the field of culture and cultural co-operation among the countries of the SADC as well as between SADC and other countries in Africa and of other continents.
- (6) Contribute to regional integration (SADC/CI/CM/95/2.1.4a).

The specific objectives were stated being to:

- (1) Develop a data bank for cultural activities in the region to ensure a permanent flow of information between participants in the network.
- (2) Assist member states in designing and implementing national policies on culture and in identifying funding possibilities.
- (3) Provide training facilities through workshops and seminars.
- (4) Provide advice on the professional methodology of information handling, selection and use of appropriate technologies, and on designing and marketing products and services that might be responsive to end users.
- (5) Help strengthen national systems of cultural information.

- (6) Build formal links between national, regional and international institutions and people interested in cultural development.

On the other hand, the national network for cultural information was mandated to endeavour to achieve the following products and services:

- (1) Provide appropriate data on cultural policies, activities, administrative structures, etc.
- (2) Provide useful data for decision making.
- (3) Orientate users to available sources of information.
- (4) Establish national directories on: researchers, artists, national heritage, cultural events, meetings, research projects, publications and other related activities.
- (5) Circulate a national newsletter on the cultural life and cultural development of the country.
- (6) Produce bibliographies and catalogues related to cultural life.
- (7) Provide consultancy services for projects related to cultural dimensions of development.

Ultimately, the sub-regional cultural and information system is envisaged as a network of networks which should be capable of providing any type of information that is relevant to cultural development. It should integrate three different sub-systems, namely the documentation, information and communication modules. It should, thus, be service and product oriented and also sustainable. The network should be developed progressively along the following priorities:

- (1) A database on cultural policies, heritage and copyright issues (including legislation, cultural administration, funding resources, tax regulations, etc.)
- (2) A database on resource persons in cultural activities.
- (3) A database on cultural events, institutions, associations and unions in the field of culture.
- (4) A database on research, training and cultural information sources in the region.

Potential users of the system were identified as being the decision makers, researchers, mass media (especially broadcasting stations), entertainers, artists, tourists and educators.

Starting from 1998 the project will be supervised by an executive body to be known as a Steering Committee consisting of all member states and co-operating partners. The Steering Committee will report to the Co-ordinating Sector for Culture and Information in Maputo (SADC/CI/CM/95/2.1.4a).

In 1996, the Co-ordinating Sector for Culture and Information convened a Meeting on the SADC Data Bank – Southern African Cultural Information System (SACIS) in Maputo which took place on the 5-9 May. The main document for discussion was the final report of the Meeting of Experts (produced in Lusaka on the 19-21 June 1995, as reported above) on the establishment of a Data Bank for Culture in the Southern African Development Community. The meeting recommended that in the initial phase the content of SACIS should embody the following categories:

- (1) Producers of cultural products and their products;
- (2) Cultural industries;
- (3) Markets for cultural products/events;
- (4) Cultural institutions;
- (5) Publications;
- (6) Cultural policies, conventions, legislation and copyrights;
- (7) Languages of the SADC region;
- (8) A newsletter on SACIS.

The Meeting also recommended that:

- (1) Member states should use e-mail in the pilot phase of the establishment of SACIS.
- (2) The Regional Co-ordinating Unit (RCU) and National Co-ordinating Units (NCUs) should standardise on MICRO ISIS.
- (3) In the initial stages, the hardware for both RCU and NCUs should be Personal Computers (PCs).
- (4) The NCUs should provide the RCU urgently, with details of the chosen Internet service providers in member states.
- (5) A newsletter on SACIS be published by the RCU on a quarterly basis, and that the RCU should receive information from NCUs 30 days before the date of publication and that the first issue be used to announce the setting up of the RCU and be distributed at the Sector's Meeting to be held in Mbabane on 10-20 May, 1996 (SADC/CI/SE/96/5).

In July 1995 Ministers of Information and Culture, at their meeting in Pretoria,

approved that the Sector Co-ordinator should create a monitoring group with the purpose of ensuring a follow-up on the recommendations of the Meeting of Experts on the Data Bank for Culture, now called the Southern African Cultural Information Systems – SACIS. They then approved:

- (1) The establishment of SACIS, and that the Regional Co-ordinator of SACIS liaise closely with the SADC Secretariat, which is also in the process of establishing a management information system which will, *inter alia*, link all sectors;
- (2) The adoption of recommendations contained in the Final Communiqué of the Maputo Meeting (SADC/CI/SE/96/5).

Cultural industries, copyright and neighbouring rights

In 1994, SADC declared 14 October Anti-Piracy Day, in Mangochi, Malawi. This was the first communiqué against piracy and the protection of Copyright and Neighbouring Rights. It was imperative that common legislation and instruments be developed to provide protection at the national level. This would ensure that member states adopt and adhere to a common position on piracy and the protection of copyright and neighbouring rights (SADC/CI/SC/2).

The Sub-committee on Information and Culture met in Mbabane, Swaziland in May 1996 and recommended that:

- (1) The contact person for Copyright matters in each member state be drawn from ministries responsible for culture and information. Such a person should copy all relevant information received to an identified contact person in the ministry administering Copyright in those member states where Copyright is administered by a ministry other than that of culture.
- (2) Contact persons be responsible for co-ordinating activities and dissemination of information on Copyright and Neighbouring Rights to all other stakeholders in the cultural industries.
- (3) Country reports should be submitted to the Sector Co-ordinating Units at least two months prior to the sector meeting, for consolidation and distribution.
- (4) Member states should endeavour to seek the assistance of WIPO and UNESCO in matters dealing with Copyright and Neighbouring Rights and the establishment of copyright organisations.

- (5) 14 October be declared Anti-Piracy Day in the SADC, being the day on which the Community issued its first communiqué against piracy and for the protection of Copyright and Neighbouring Rights at Mangochi, Malawi in 1994. Commemoration of the day will highlight the problems of piracy, and could include activities such as national and regional seminars on piracy (SADC/CI/CO/96/2).

The SADC Ministers of Culture and Information, at their meeting of 20 May 1996 in Mbabane, Swaziland, agreed to recommend that the Council approve all the above-mentioned recommendations of the Subcommittee on Information and Culture. They also recalled that at their meeting held in Pretoria in July 1995 they considered and approved the recommendations of the Regional Seminar on Copyright and Neighbouring Rights held at Mangochi, Malawi in October 1994. One of the recommendations of that seminar was that a Protocol on Piracy and the Protection of Copyright and Neighbouring Rights was necessary to effect common action and achieve common goals within the Community for the development and protection of its cultural industries. In order to achieve this, it was essential that common legislation and instruments that provide protection at national level be developed first. The Ministers then approved that:

- (1) The draft Protocol on Piracy and the Protection of Copyright and Neighbouring Rights be adopted as a working document.
- (2) The draft be sent to member states for their inputs and for thorough legal consideration and be returned to the Sector Co-ordinating Unit for submission to the next sectoral meetings.
- (3) At national level stakeholders in cultural industries and copyright matters be involved in the discussion of the draft.

The Ministers further approved that the Guidelines for the Harmonisation of Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Legislation be referred to a committee of legal experts to be chaired by Malawi, for consideration with regard to definitions, ancillary concepts and technical developments.

Conclusion

It is fitting to conclude by acknowledging that not only is SADC gearing itself up to the

challenges of the information society but it is also in a process of reviewing and rationalising its programme of action and associated policies and strategies in order to determine their relevance and appropriateness to the development and integration needs of the member states. Consultants have already reported at a workshop held in Gaborone (4-6 August 1997) to examine their recommendations (SADC, 1997). In as far as communication and information are concerned, the consultants have made the observation that the private sector and other stakeholders appear to have very little specific knowledge about the SADC Programme of Action. There appears to be no mechanism for a formal exchange of information. The SADC sectors do not seem to have done enough to explain to all stakeholders what their aims and objectives are. A comprehensive communications programme is needed therefore to address these issues and others (Chipeta *et al.*, 1997). SADC has also commissioned a study on the formulation of policies, priorities and strategies for culture, information and public education (Mutanyatta and Nyirenda, 1997). This study has identified, among others, problems relating to communication infrastructure, independence of the media from government interference and lack of co-operation from government authorities in some member states in relation to the media's function of collecting information and news which is of public interest.

On a wider perspective which embraces all Africa, the African Information Society Initiative (African Information Society Initiative, 1996) recommends that, in line with the relevant resolutions of the Regional African Telecommunication Development Conference (Harare, 1992) and the Buenos Aires Declaration (WD-94 Buenos Aires, 1994), all African countries should increase accessibility to telecommunication networks/services and to the global information infrastructure, in particular for people in rural and isolated areas.

SADC therefore would appear to be taking this recommendation seriously.

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