

The Evolving Role of Public Libraries in South Africa in Addressing Information Poverty: A Historical Context

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Structured Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the historical development of libraries in South Africa against a backdrop of poverty and social inequality. This article illustrates how the development of libraries in South Africa both reflected and influenced information poverty and has as its goal to increase awareness of the role of libraries in the alleviation of information poverty. The information in this article is based on doctoral research completed by the author who investigated the role of libraries in the alleviation of information poverty in South Africa. The methodology for the research included two case studies, interviews, examination of library records, and observation. An extensive review of the professional literature and recorded histories provided imperative context for that research and this article. Findings indicate that libraries can play an important role in the alleviation of information poverty in South Africa. Libraries are underutilized in this role and to increase their capacity in addressing information poverty, one should consider the historical circumstances behind the dispossession of library services. Understanding the development of libraries in South Africa and sociopolitical ramifications of this development can encourage and inform greater participation of libraries in the alleviation of information poverty in the future. This article compiles the work and findings of previous studies on the history of South African libraries. The information provided here offers an accessible and efficient history of libraries in South Africa. In so doing, it provides context that is invaluable to the understanding of how the development of libraries throughout time can have sociopolitical effects on the people and their circumstances. The article also encourages increased understanding of the value and purpose of libraries in combating information poverty in South Africa.

Introduction

Many South Africans, particularly those in rural areas, are still living under conditions of information poverty, which we define as that situation in which people, within a specific context, do not have the required skills, abilities, and/or material means to access and use information in a meaningful way to address their needs. In other words, they find it challenging to access and use essential information in addressing their daily needs regarding their health, education and employment opportunities and a lack of access to libraries exacerbate this condition. This form of information poverty is aggravated in cases where people have limited access to electricity, transportation, or simply the lack of a physical space where they can sit down and, for example, do their homework after school.

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3 It goes without saying that public libraries are best suited to address this form of poverty - not
4 only by providing free access to needed information and assisting patrons in understanding their
5 own information needs, but also to 'be' the physical space with furniture, electricity, and running
6 water where people can find a place to read, to work, and to interact with others where
7 knowledge can be shared.
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10 In South Africa, public libraries have had limited successes in addressing this form of poverty,
11 particularly in rural areas (Strand, 2016). There are many reasons for this including a lack of
12 financial resources, but as librarian Dave Hudson (2012) argues, in order to fully comprehend
13 this form of information poverty in rural areas of South Africa, one should also consider the
14 historical circumstances behind the dispossession of library services. The quest for this historical
15 context explains the reason for this article: to provide an overview of the history of libraries in
16 South Africa against the backdrop of poverty and in particular, information poverty.
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18 ***1761: Where it all started***

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21 In 1761, the ground was laid for the first modern public library in Cape Town, South Africa,
22 upon the death of well-educated bibliophile Joachim Nicolas von Dessin (Immelman, 1972:16).
23 Von Dessin had a private library of some 3,800 volumes which was donated to the Dutch
24 Reformed Church for use by the “general public” (Immelman, 1972:16; Lor, 1997:236). The
25 “general public” to whom Von Dessin referred were the Cape colonists. In 1820, the Dessinian
26 collection would go on to form the nucleus of the South African Public Library, which was
27 established by Lord Charles Somerset in 1818 (Dick, 2007:14) and officially opened in 1822
28 (Lor, 1997). Lord Somerset was an aristocrat and Governor of the Cape Colony whose aim for
29 the South African Public Library was to help educate and maintain a certain level of knowledge
30 and culture for the colonists (Friis, 1962:70). Somerset envisioned a library that “shall be open to
31 the public, and lay the foundation of a system, which shall place the means of knowledge within
32 the reach of the Youth of this remote corner of the Globe and bring within their reach... ‘Home
33 Education’” (Lor, 1997:237; Satgoor, 2015:98).
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37 Some recognized the educational value of libraries from early on in South Africa. Dick (2007:14-
38 16) writes that missionaries in the early 1800s were focused on increasing literacy levels of the
39 people, taught reading and writing in mission stations, and some even offered people books and
40 other study materials. While these early libraries laid the foundation for a public library system
41 in South Africa, they were largely intended for European settlers, not for the indigenous people
42 already inhabiting the area.
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45 From their inception, libraries in South Africa had trouble maintaining consistent funding. Public
46 and governmental support for public libraries in South Africa has been difficult to come by and
47 thus, funding has been inadequate. For some time, the South African Public Library was free and
48 funded by a tax on wine (Satgoor, 2015:98) but by 1829, it became a subscription library due to
49 lack of funding (Immelman, 1972:19; Lor, 1997:237). For many years, libraries existed on the
50 subscriptions of members. Dick (2007:14-15) does point out that a few subscription libraries
51 opened non-subscribers’ rooms, such as Queenstown Library, established in 1859, that offered
52 magazines and newspapers for non-subscribers. Despite this, the system of subscription libraries
53 did not serve any poor South African, Black or White, very effectively (Walker, 1994:62).
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3 Several individuals and numerous secular self-help and social organizations that were created in
4 the mid- to late-19th century also encouraged library use, literacy, and the growth of a reading
5 culture in South Africa (Cobley, 1997; Dick, 2007). For example, Cobley (1997:63-64) relates
6 the efforts of Black businessman A.W.G. Champion, who, after being denied membership in
7 Durban's library in 1926, realized that it would be up to committed individuals to fight and raise
8 money for the creation of libraries for Blacks since sharing library facilities with Whites was
9 unthinkable in the growing era of segregationist South Africa. Opened in 1924, the Bantu¹ Men's
10 Social Centre located in Johannesburg offered a small library to Blacks (Cobley, 1997:64) and
11 would become a depot of the Carnegie Non-European Library in 1932 (Cobley, 1997:65; Dick,
12 2007:2). Women's organizations, such as the South African Women's Federation, the Afrikaans
13 Women's Christian Society, and the Victoria League, also had an impact on the growth of
14 libraries and the reading culture at this time by partnering with teachers and the Department of
15 Education and then with the Union Defense Force during World War II to provide books to
16 soldiers and increase their literacy levels (Dick, 2007:17-18). A smaller number of organizations
17 founded and run by mission-educated African women encouraged reading as well as other forms
18 of self-improvement, especially for African women who lived in rural areas (Dick, 2007:17).
19 Another individual, Dr. A.B. Xuma operated a library service for "Non-European" South
20 Africans from a room of his home in the 1930s (Cobley, 1997:64). Dick (2007:16) points out that
21 noted author Sol Plaatje was a member of a society based in Kimberly through which he was
22 able to combine the society's interest in promoting Black readership with his own interest in
23 libraries.² Unfortunately, most of the efforts by individuals and societies floundered due to lack
24 of stock and funding (Cobley, 1997).
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30 Funding and other support to aid in stability of library services in South Africa would eventually
31 come from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which has provided financial assistance for
32 library research and development. These efforts were sparked by the reports of S.A. Pitt and
33 Milton J. Ferguson, who visited South Africa on behalf of the Carnegie Corporation of New
34 York's British Dominion program in 1928. Pitt was the City Librarian of Glasgow and Ferguson,
35 the State Librarian of California. The two were charged with surveying the library situation in
36 South Africa (Walker, 1994:60) and published separate reports in the following year. Both Pitt
37 and Ferguson described less than stellar library services and buildings in their reports (Lor,
38 1997). They expressed strong feelings against subscription libraries in South Africa and
39 criticized them as inefficient and unsuitable (Walker, 1994). Pitt and Ferguson "regarded library
40 provision as a necessity to promote racial uplift, foster interracial understanding, and maintain
41 social order" (Cobley, 1997:64). Despite this, there is a clear racial bias in the reports which
42 reflect the attitudes of the time period (Kalley, 2000) and race was clearly an issue that inhibited
43 the evolution of libraries in South Africa (Lor, 1997). While there was a growing understanding
44 of the value of libraries in the development of the South Africa citizenry, prevailing attitudes at
45 the time dictated that library facilities, materials, and other provisions must be separated by race,
46 geographic location, and socioeconomic status.
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54 ¹ Bantu is a term that was used at the time to describe Black South Africans. It is currently regarded as a derogatory
55 term and no longer used.

56 ² For a more detailed description of the cultural contexts of library development in South Africa, see Dick (2007).
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The road through Bloemfontein

These attitudes were also expressed at an important South African library conference convened in November of 1928 at Bloemfontein, where Pitt and Ferguson ended their travels (Lor, 1997). According to Walker (1994), the main concerns of those in attendance at the Bloemfontein Conference included the expansion of a reading culture, especially among children; the acknowledgement that library services are an extension of the educational system; the provision of adequate library services to the “Non-European” population; and creation of a coordinated library service to avoid costly and inefficient library service provision (Walker, 1994:60).

Several important developments came out of this conference including the creation of the South African Library Association (SALA) in 1930 and the journal *South African Libraries*. In addition, the conference addressed the need to restructure library services in South Africa, to develop professional library training, to create a South African national bibliography, and to uniformly catalogue materials (Walker, 1994:60-61). Many library issues were addressed and not unlike other areas of South African life at the time, the issue of race permeated discussions of library services in the reports of Pitt and Ferguson and at the Bloemfontein Conference. As Ferguson (1929:17) wrote about the conference in his report, “The most heated debate arose, let it be said, over the question involving service to the natives” (Walker, 1994:60). So, while the creation of libraries in South Africa was a positive advancement in that any available books could have a radical impact on Black consciousness and intellectualism (Cobley, 1997:67), the provision of high-quality, equitable, and properly funded libraries and services for all South Africans would remain distant.

From Bloemfontein to Germiston

Immelman (1972:30) describes the Bloemfontein Conference as “the dividing line between the former stagnant state of affairs in the library field in South Africa and the beginnings of the modern period of progress.” Over the next decade, the seeds that were planted in 1928’s Bloemfontein Conference began to grow, albeit unevenly. In 1930, the Carnegie Corporation established a fund for the creation of the first library service to “Non-European” South Africans to be based at the Germiston Public Library in the Transvaal (Walker, 1994:64). Based on the public county library system in the United States, the Germiston Library served as a central depot from which books and other services were administered to some 78 branches by 1938 (Cobley, 1997:65). Of these, 28 served Africans; some in schools, some in rural areas, some in townships, and one in the afore-mentioned Bantu Men’s Social Centre (Walker, 1994:64; Cobley, 1997:65). In 1937, Carnegie’s Non-European Library Committee appointed writer Herbert Dhlomo the first Non-European Librarian-Organizer in hopes of improving the library situation for Blacks in South Africa (Cobley, 1997:66; Walker, 1994:64).

Ultimately, Dhlomo and the Carnegie Non-European Library disagreeably parted ways and the position was downgraded in job duties, benefits, pay, and power (Cobley, 1997:68). While the Carnegie Non-European Library did demonstrate the desire among Africans for libraries and reading materials, it was also clear that the Committee believed control of the libraries should remain in their hands so that they may be used as instruments “for socialization and social control” (Cobley, 1997:67). One committee member, Ray Phillips, again expressed the importance of supplying “good” reading materials to “Non-Europeans” in order to influence their

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3 judgment and decision-making; a process in which “the influence and example of literaryminded
4 Europeans should be invaluable” (quoted in Cobley, 1997:69). This racialized approach to
5 library purpose, control, and provisioning would continue during this period and throughout the
6 apartheid era.
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8 *The 1937 interdepartmental committee – the library landscape starts to change*

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10 The Carnegie Corporation continued to offer support where the South African government was
11 lacking and there were various other reading rooms, libraries, and library services focused on the
12 Black population throughout the 1930s (Cobley, 1997; Walker, 1994). As Lor (1997) points out,
13 prevailing racial attitudes in South Africa at the time can be seen in public library development.
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16 Even the Carnegie Corporation accepted the prevalent racist attitudes and awarded separate
17 funding to support separate libraries for Whites and Blacks and the grants to support “Non-
18 European” libraries were markedly smaller than the others (Lor, 1997:240). In 1937, an
19 Interdepartmental Committee was appointed to investigate libraries, their organization, services,
20 funding, support, and personnel (Immelman, 1972:30-31). The focus of the committee was to
21 suggest improvements in these areas in order to increase the educational functioning of public
22 libraries in South Africa (Immelman, 1972:30-31). The Committee determined that “...in library
23 development the Union of South Africa lags behind the rest of the civilized world,” and that “to
24 remedy this state of affairs a strong lead must be given by the Government of the country, and
25 the active cooperation of municipal and other local authorities secured” (Immelman, 1972:31).
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29 New standards for professional librarians, training, salaries, library services, and the erection of
30 new library buildings were recommended by the 1937 Interdepartmental Committee (Immelman,
31 1972). In addition, it advocated for the establishment of a free library service in South Africa
32 (Immelman, 1972). At that time, there were only seven free public libraries (Walker, 1994:64).
33 Despite the good intentions of the committee, the outbreak of World War II would prove too big
34 an obstacle to overcome and library improvements were mostly put on hold. But in 1939, the
35 Johannesburg Public Library assumed control of the Bantu Men’s Social Centre library, which
36 was a positive development in library services for Blacks because it would be staffed, receive
37 materials from the municipality, and became a free service to Blacks in Johannesburg (Cobley,
38 1997). The following year, the first library specifically for Africans, Winifred Holtby Memorial
39 Library, was built in Western Native Township (Cobley, 1997). Also between 1944 and 1951,
40 each of the (at that time, four) provinces began offering free public library services (Walker,
41 1994; Friis, 1962) that were based on partnerships between municipal and provincial
42 governments (Lor, 1997). However, most of these free library services were still only for Whites
43 (Lor, 1997). In order to address the lack of government leadership and support for public
44 libraries, the 1937 Interdepartmental Committee recommended restructuring the public library
45 system in South Africa. Throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s, each of the provinces
46 made strides toward a more organized system of a provincial headquarters and smaller regional
47 systems within (Immelman, 1972). The Interdepartmental Committee suggested that each
48 province handle rural library services in its areas instead of the state managing them (Immelman,
49 1972; Walker, 1994). A Librarian-Organizer could manage rural and school library services
50 collaboratively (Walker, 1994). Despite these improvements, library services to underserved
51 populations, such as rural, poor, or Black South Africans, would remain challenging issues
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facing public libraries. Cobley (1997) supplies convincing data of the inequality of provisions in libraries for Europeans and those for Non-Europeans that are presented in Table 1 below: **Table 1: Comparison of Book Stock in Non-European and European Libraries, 1938 and 1944**

Year:	1938	1944
Non-European Book Stock	0	18 850
European Book Stock	185 084	336 652

Source: Cobley (1997:74)

Between 1938 and 1944, books for Whites and Blacks were purchased at a rate of ten to one (Cobley, 1997:74-75). As Cobley (1997) adeptly observes, the importance of this era in the provision of libraries in South Africa is the acknowledgement of the need for library services for Blacks but also in the recognition that the library services allowed to Blacks were seen by the White-dominated state as another method of social and political control.

1948: Libraries under apartheid South Africa

When the National Party came into power in 1948, it began formally legislating the longpracticed separation of races in South Africa. The Group Areas Act of 1950 was just one of the many laws passed that would prove to have lasting effects in South Africa by controlling where people were allowed to live, work, and travel. Prior to the Bantu Education Act of 1953, library provisions to “Non-Europeans” were subjected to fierce scrutiny by the Eiselen Commission on Native Education (Cobley, 1997:75); the passage of the Act formalized strict regulations regarding reading materials by the different ethnic groups (Cobley, 1997:76). Then in 1956, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act nationally regulated the access to libraries according to race and effectively controlled and policed library provisions to Blacks (Cobley, 1997:76). In 1967, the national government created the National Library Advisory Council to oversee library development and services. After becoming the National Advisory Council for Libraries and Information in 1974, the group was disbanded when in 1987 the government saw no need for a national LIS policy (Walker, 1993; Fourie, 2007). Throughout the apartheid era, libraries and their services continued to be separate for the races and the development of those for South Africans of color lagged behind those for Whites (Lor, 1997; Witbooi, 2007). By 1951, only eleven municipalities across South Africa provided “Non-European” libraries (Cobley, 1997:75). Physical accessibility of libraries was prohibitive; geographic and financial barriers were not easily overcome (Witbooi, 2007). In 1974, historically White libraries Johannesburg Public Library and the Natal Society Library in Pietermaritzburg began to allow Blacks, and Satgoor (2015:98) notes that others soon followed but the inequalities in access and resource provisions were far from over. Even when all races had library facilities they could utilize, the provision of materials and status of accommodations for Blacks were markedly inferior to those for Whites (Witbooi, 2007).

1962: One step forward, two steps back

Lor (1997) describes two important events that occurred in the South African library sphere in 1962. The first was a national conference developed in part by SALA and focused on library

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3 development, in much the same way as the Bloemfontein Conference. This was a positive step
4 forward and culminated in recommendations regarding changes in the structure of and
5 cooperation among libraries, in addition to other things. If this conference in 1962 was a step
6 forward, the second event was a step back: at their annual conference that year, SALA voted to
7 restrict its membership to Whites and to establish separate associations for other racial groups
8 (Lor, 1997). Lor (1997) gives a brief explanation of the library profession at the time which
9 would have led to the decision to segregate the association. In part, librarians felt the intimidation
10 that was prevalent during this era and feared the retaliation that may have occurred if they spoke
11 out against the apartheid system as it manifested in segregation of libraries and censorship of
12 information (Lor, 1997). In addition, some saw outright activism as
13 “unprofessional” and held that librarianship was a profession that should be politically neutral.
14 SALA’s members were understandably concerned about repercussions of not falling into line
15 with National Party apartheid rule but this decision would prove to have lasting negative effects
16 not only on SALA and South African libraries and librarianship, but on information access and
17 equality in general. “SALA’s submissiveness fatally undermined the professionalism and moral
18 authority of its member librarians and the library profession in South Africa in general” (Lor,
19 1997:243).

24 *The 1980s: Change on the horizon*

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26 In 1980, SALA was disbanded and replaced by the South Africa Institute of Librarianship and
27 Information Science (SAILIS). SAILIS was not racially segregated but its focus was on
28 professionalization of librarianship. Because of this, many Black South Africans were effectively
29 barred from the organization when they failed to meet the educational and professional
30 qualifications for membership (Lor, 1997). Lor (1997) explains that throughout the 1980s,
31 SAILIS and South African librarianship became more dedicated to librarianship as information
32 science, to developing professional standards, and to growing technological advances. “But the
33 profession’s growing technical sophistication was not matched by intellectual and moral
34 strength. Instead, librarians retreated into the safety of the politically neutral library...” (Lor,
35 1997:246). This faction of librarians was slowly coming to terms with the fact that social and
36 political change was coming that would affect their profession (Lor, 1997).

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38 Also in the 1980s was the emergence of resource centers as alternatives “to the traditional public
39 library, which was perceived as not rendering a relevant service in areas with active community
40 and political lives” (Witbooi, 2007:63). Resource centers most often served as meeting places for
41 local people and civic organizations but also offered some books, periodicals, and newspapers, as
42 well as audiovisual and printing equipment. After some time, these resource centers were
43 subsumed by public libraries with the most useful factors of each combined into one service
44 (Witbooi, 2007).

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46 An important report, commissioned by SAILIS and written by Professor R. B. Zaaiman in 1988,
47 examined the role of libraries in South African development. While he suggested new services
48 and modalities of delivery for libraries, Zaaiman did so while reinforcing the apartheid status quo
49 regarding Black South Africans. Although he warned librarians against a paternalistic approach,
50 he also referred to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs when defending providing appropriate services
51 to “a community whose needs are mainly at the lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy...” (quoted
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3 in Lor, 1997:248; Zaaïman, 1988:22-23). In addition, Zaaïman reaffirmed the idea that libraries
4 should be apolitical because they would “lose their legitimacy” if they were seen as biased or
5 offering propagandistic materials (quoted in Lor, 1997:245; Zaaïman, 1988:244). At this time,
6 new libraries were being provided for Black South Africans but these libraries, too, were status
7 quo. All South Africans were being served with libraries which were based on Western models
8 and Zaaïman recognized that this would not suffice for long and recommended a cooperative
9 approach to library development in South Africa (Lor, 1997). Libraries must be “Africanized,”
10 although Zaaïman predicted it would be difficult for White librarians to adjust to this change
11 (Lor, 1997:250; Zaaïman, 1988:232). Unfortunately, the Zaaïman report reflected the library
12 profession at the time and stopped short of advocating for real and immediate change in libraries
13 for Black South Africans. *The 1990s: An era of change*

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17 It was not long before a growing liberal group of librarians called for an end to library apartheid
18 and advocated a more radical reconceptualization of the profession, its methods, and its services
19 (Lor, 1997). It was from this movement that in 1990, the Library and Information Workers
20 Organization (LIWO) was founded. LIWO was a library association in South Africa that was
21 created as more progressive alternative to SAILIS. Dedicated to the democratic movement,
22 LIWO challenged apartheid-era concepts and practices in libraries. Its members sought to
23 “challenge neo-apartheid and the new orthodoxy; provide a home for those library and
24 information workers wanting to compensate for the cowardice of their profession in the past; and
25 play a role in the debate about the future of South Africa, alongside like-minded democrats
26 seeking a just and humane social order” (Lor, 1997:253). To this end, LIWO played a role in
27 another important report generated at the time.

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31 In 1992, the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) produced a Library and Information
32 Services report that examined the role of libraries as educational institutions. This report
33 explained the South African approach to librarianship as one influenced by Anglo-American
34 ideals of elitism, high technology, and professional neutrality (Lor, 1997). The continued focus
35 on neutrality could lead some in the library profession in South Africa to look the other way and
36 remain silent on the pressing political and social issues of the day but the NEPI report presented
37 three alternatives that aligned more appropriately with the needs of South Africans (Lor,
38 1997:254):

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41 1. The structuralist or radical approach: Non-elitist, community-centered, developmental,
42 serviceoriented and based on ideas of community librarianship and resource centers for
43 development;
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45 2. African librarianship: Similar to the structuralist approach with attention paid to poverty,
46 illiteracy, and limited funding; and
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48 3. The cultural life approach: Emphasizes the needs of library workers, such as empowerment,
49 professional development, and inclusion.

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51 The structure of the national library system was complicated during this era. While the provision
52 of public libraries was the responsibility of local authorities, both municipal and provincial
53 authorities were involved in governance and funding (Witbooi, 2007). There were two main
54 types of libraries in this structure: non-affiliated and affiliated. Ten non-affiliated libraries were
55 located in larger city centers and were separate from provincial library services. Affiliated
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3 libraries on the other hand, were managed by (1) local authorities that were responsible for
4 human resources and salaries and (2) provincial authorities that awarded grants, provided
5 materials, and assisted with professional development and infrastructure (Witbooi, 2007). The
6 lack of standardized library administration is a recurring theme and contributes to the unequal
7 provision and management of libraries, thus worsening the state of information equality and
8 poverty based on race, geographic location, and socioeconomic factors.
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10 11 ***1994 and beyond: Libraries in the new South Africa***

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13 In post-apartheid South Africa, libraries and their role, functions, and services had to evolve to
14 meet changing user needs. In order to redress the inequalities of library and information services
15 (LIS) in the apartheid era which were based on race, geography, and socioeconomic status, the
16 Bill of Rights in the new Constitution of South Africa expressly states the right of access to
17 information for all citizens. This era saw the creation of the National Library of South Africa
18 and the National Library of the Blind in 1998, changes in the structure of the management of the
19 library system, and attempts to redress the inequalities previously supported by libraries in
20 apartheid South Africa. In July of 1997, the Library and Information Science Association of
21 South Africa (LIASA) was created as a result of the unification of previous LIS professional
22 organizations in South Africa, including SAILIS but not LIWO. To its members, LIASA
23 provides professional development, support, guidance, structure, an annual conference, and
24 special interest groups.
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28 Several important reports illustrated the concerns of LIS in South Africa at this time. One survey
29 conducted in 1995 by the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) listed the main concerns as the
30 structure of the library system as well as the governance and funding of libraries (Witbooi,
31 2007:64). ACTAG proposed that national funding support library literacy projects including
32 adult education and promotion of a reading culture, as well as focus on development of poor
33 youth (Witbooi, 2007:64). The addition of study spaces in libraries or the creation of learning
34 centers was proposed to support the growing number of students using libraries for schoolwork
35 (Witbooi, 2007:64). In the early 2000s, the Public and Community Libraries Inventory of South
36 Africa (PaCLISA) was undertaken. The goal of this survey was to compile a complete list of all
37 public and community libraries in South Africa. Information gathered included the location and
38 characteristics of the library including the size and composition of the collections, as well as
39 membership information, circulation statistics, and a comparison to other international libraries
40 (Van Helden and Lor, 2002). These findings included (Van Helden and Lor, 2002; Witbooi,
41 2007):
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- 45 • Data collection and reporting of library information was inconsistent in types of data available
46 and collected as well as in measurement methods used. Standardization of these factors would be
47 required moving forward.
- 48 • No standardized LIS terminology existed; a consistent lexicon is necessary for a cohesive library
49 community.
- 50 • The library system was inconsistent and varied widely amongst provinces and municipalities. An
51 inventory of libraries that is consistent and current would be imperative to streamlining and
52 improving library administration in South Africa.
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- Public libraries in South Africa were serving less than 10% of the population, mainly the educated, urban middle class.

Another report that focused on the funding of libraries demonstrated the challenges faced in assessing post-apartheid South African libraries. The 2005 Print Industries Cluster Council (PICC) report indicated that what provinces counted as public libraries varied greatly and at times included community libraries, depots, prison libraries, and more (Witbooi, 2007). In addition, the PICC report illustrated the great transitions in South African libraries post-1994. These included closures of some libraries, merging of others, concerns about equitable access to libraries as well as questions of funding, administration, structure, and staffing (Witbooi, 2007). In addition, library destruction continued in this era. Building on the work of Van Onselen (2013), Lor (2013:361) found that between 2005 and 2012, 18 libraries were damaged or destroyed due to service delivery protests. While each of the nine provinces all have established provincial library systems, it is clear that the legacy of racial discrimination has left an indelible mark on South African libraries (Satgoor, 2015:99).

Satgoor (2015) describes several 21st century initiatives and changes that aim to address inequities and improve library and information services for the majority of the South African population. These include the following:

- Library oversight now falls under several government departments,
- The establishment of the National Council for Library and Information Services (NCLIS) in 2001 to advise the Ministers of Arts and Culture, Basic Education, and Higher Education and Training on issues regarding LIS
- The completion in 2014 of the Library and Information Services (LIS) Transformation Charter. This was a project of NCLIS, and “provides a clear and coherent plan for LIS in alignment with the National Development Plan so that the vision of an informed and reading nation becomes a reality” (Satgoor, 2015:101; DAC and NCLIS, 2014:7).
- The launching in 2012 of the South African National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 aiming “...to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 through uniting South Africans, unleashing the energies of its citizens, growing an inclusive economy, building capabilities, and enhancing the capability of the state and leaders working together to solve complex problems (Satgoor, 2015:99). There is an important opportunity here for libraries to get involved with the NDP and exercise their developmental skills to the public, policymakers, and funders.

Challenges facing South African libraries in the democratic era

As the era of legal apartheid came to an end, South Africa began a difficult evolution to democracy and the challenges associate with it. Unfortunately, some opportunities for libraries to participate in the development of this young democracy were lost. For example, the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) scarcely mentioned the participation of libraries (Lor, 1997). In areas where illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty numbers were high, libraries were either non-existent or seriously lacking (Witbooi, 2007). Libraries faced many challenges in attempting to find their place in the development and growth of the new South Africa and in many cases, were relegated low priority. Witbooi (2007:67) correctly argues that because of this, most libraries still lack suitable resources, staffing, facilities, and funding. The concept of the public library itself is sometimes challenged and its relevance questioned.

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3 Libraries are at times associated with White colonizers and not seen as relevant to the many of
4 the Black majority. In addition, the role that libraries could play in education and literacy is
5 undervalued. Because of the reputation libraries built as supporters of apartheid policies, they can
6 be distrusted and stigmatized (Lor, 1997). ICT and infrastructure have not been fully developed
7 in many areas and the digital divide has grown. Finally, assessment of library services has always
8 been challenging. In South Africa, this task is exacerbated by lack of uniformity in data
9 collection, lack of centralized direction of assessment planning, and lack of training of library
10 staff in LIS assessment best practices. These challenges still exist in South African libraries
11 today and contribute to information inequality and poverty of many of its people.
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14 ***Conclusion***

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16 In the introduction, we stated that many South Africans, particularly those in the rural areas, are
17 still living in a condition of information poverty, whereby they lack the ability to access and use
18 essential information in addressing their needs. We furthermore stated that public libraries can
19 and should play a key role in addressing this form of poverty, but had only limited success. There
20 are many reasons for this such as a lack of funding, undervaluing of libraries, lack of political
21 will, etc. We however followed Hudson's (2012) line of thought by arguing that the historical
22 context of the development of public libraries in South Africa is key to the understanding of the
23 challenges and limited successes of public libraries in the alleviation of information poverty in
24 South Africa. In this article, we provided such a context that will hopefully provide a better
25 understanding of the evolving role of public libraries in a continuous effort to address
26 information poverty in this young democracy.
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Table 1: Comparison of Book Stock in Non-European and European Libraries, 1938 and 1944

Year:	1938	1944
Non-European Book Stock	0	18 850
European Book Stock	185 084	336 652

Source: Cobley (1997:74)

Library Management