From “Outreach” To New Models of Library Service

Prof Genevieve Hart
Associate Professor, Department of Library and Information Science, University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Abstract

South Africa is aligned with other emerging economies, like Brazil and India, whose voice is growing stronger and who might in future improve their position in the global knowledge economy. But surely the biggest hurdle must be the huge gap in South Africa between rich and poor – claimed by some to be the biggest in the world. More than 48% of South Africans live below the poverty line. Other speakers at the symposium will provide evidence of the role of information in the sustainable development required to narrow the poverty gap. The developed countries of the so-called “North” have systems for easy and wide access to information – by means of e-government, e-medicine, e-education, and, so on. However, less than 10% of South Africans have access to the Internet. This paper will examine the contribution, real and potential, of public libraries to sustainable development.

The point of departure is the developmental model of library services proposed in the recent Library & Information Services (LIS) Transformation Charter, a vision document emanating from the National Council of Library and Information Services. The Charter suggests that UNESCO’s eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) might provide a framework for developmental library services. However, the Charter’s country-wide investigations, as well as the speaker’s own research since the late 1990s, have uncovered some of the daunting challenges ahead. The paper will report on two ongoing case studies, which might throw light on how the Charter’s vision could become a reality. One is of a group of dual use school community libraries in a remote rural region and the other focuses on two sister libraries in Cape Town. The argument is that what are often viewed as “outreach” programmes point the way to new models of library service which will be meaningful to far more than the present tiny minority of South African library users.