Collaborating to Meet the Needs of Researchers in Africa

Social and technological development depend vitally on access to reliable scientific and technical information. And timely exchange of data is crucial for scientists and scholars to remain current in their disciplines.

In the past two decades, key repositories of this information —research libraries and their collections—have deteriorated significantly in many African countries, heightening the isolation of researchers across the continent.

Economic conditions have made budgets for journal subscriptions negligible in many cases, and some libraries now depend almost solely on donors for acquisitions. To help meet those needs, AAAS ships more than 1 ton of scholarly journals each month—representing nearly 200 titles in science and the humanities—to about 150 universities and research institute libraries in sub-Saharan Africa.

These are current journals donated at little or no cost to AAAS by the publishers, mainly societies affiliated with the Association. (The project does not accept archival collections.)

Commenting on the effectiveness of the initiative, one librarian in Nigeria wrote to AAAS: "This programme has given our library a facelift. The current titles from AAAS have brought our patrons, who hitherto had been on the run, back to the library once more."

Since the African libraries project began in 1987, AAAS also has conducted studies and collaborated with African institutions on meetings to address issues related to information services, most recently a conference at the University of Zimbabwe on "Survival Strategies in African University Libraries: New Technologies in the Service of Information."

Today in the United States, the escalating cost of scholarly journals is spurring many libraries to cancel nonessential subscriptions and replace them with electronic databases and document-delivery services.

Although access to on-line databases is not yet feasible for most African researchers, "CD-ROM is an exciting alternative for African libraries faced with daunting responsibilities and extremely limited financial resources," said Lisbeth Levey, director of the African libraries project.

One medical librarian in Africa, shortly before acquiring a CD-ROM workstation, described her university as characterized by "depleted library resources, a shattered economy, and an anxious staff"; today, the library conducts MEDLINE searches for health professionals across the country, using e-mail to receive requests and transmit results.

Hands on. CD-ROM demonstrations at the University of Zimbabwe in October 1992.

> ## AAAS ships more than 1 ton of scholarly journals to African libraries each month.

"Even after CD-ROM searches are completed, full-text documents are difficult for many African universities to obtain because of cost or lack of local availability," Levey said. To help address that problem, AAAS has launched a 3-year pilot project, in partnership with seven African universities and three U.S. foundations, that couples provision of CD-ROM databases in the sciences and social sciences with document-delivery assis-

tance. The project will evaluate how well CD-ROM can supplement journal subscriptions and at what cost.

The universities of Addis Ababa, Dar es Salaam, Ghana, Ibadan, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are participating in the project. Earlier this month, librarians and end-users from those institutions met in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to lay the groundwork, discussing such topics as recordkeeping, document delivery, and long-term sustainability of CD-ROM. Follow-up meetings will include one on collection development in the new electronic era and a final workshop to present study results to senior African university administrators and donors.

AAAS works in other ways to boost access to scientific and technical information in sub-Saharan Africa.

Electronic networking, already integral to the normal conduct of science in the developed world, holds great promise for reducing the information gap for African scientists and scholars. Recent workshops in Accra, Ghana, and Nairobi, Kenya, sponsored by AAAS brought together university officials, technical experts, and researchers from African institutions to explore ways of bolstering communication through this important technology.

"African university leaders no longer question why they need e-mail but rather are asking how they can get up and running— and soon," said Amy Gimbel, director of the Sub-Saharan Africa Program. AAAS is compiling a user's guide to electronic networks in Africa as well.

The AAAS program also keeps policy-makers, development specialists, and others in the United States informed on issues concerning science in Africa through regular forums and publications.

On 10 May in Washington, D.C., the seventh in a series of public meetings will focus on "capacity building." Leading African scientists and educators will discuss African-led initiatives in policy and higher education to strengthen science and technology in the region, and keynote speaker Thomas Odhiambo of Kenya, president of the African Academy of Sciences, will describe the African Foundation for Research and Development, now getting under way.

Activities of the Sub-Saharan Africa Program are funded by grants from the Carnegie Foundation of New York and the Ford Foundation. The University of Malawi's participation in the CD-ROM project is supported by a Rockefeller Foundation grant to the university for library automation.

For more information, contact Amy Gimbel via Internet at agimbel@aaas.org or Lisbeth Levey at llevey@aaas.org. Or call the program offices at 202-326-6730.

> The name of **Lewis P. Lipsitt**, winner of a 1993 AAAS Mentor Award for Lifetime Achievement, was misspelled in last month's "Inside AAAS." We regret the error.—Ed.