

IFLA/FAIFE
World Report:
Libraries and
Intellectual Freedom



Rwanda

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Rwanda, first became the German protectorate, then successively a mandate and trusteeship of Belgium. From the beginning of its written history, the country has since been exposed to the dispersion of its important documents. Therefore this is how, the traces of the country's history were found in Tanzania, Germany, Belgium, Burundi and Congo Kinshasa.

Population:	8,100,000 (1999)
GNP per capita:	\$ 260 (1998)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	English, French, Kinyarwanda
Main religions:	Christianity, Islam, animism
Literacy:	60,5%
Online:	0,07 (July 2000)

It is obvious then, that before independence, there existed some scientific collections serving as specialized libraries. These collections served the colonial researchers above all and at a lesser extent the natives, named research auxiliaries.

Apart from these centers, the missionaries possessed some collections of works for themselves and for the schools they directed.

As far as the public libraries are concerned, there was only one public library for natives in each of the ten chiefdoms of the territory, and one library for European operating in Kigali.

After the independence, the Rwandan government has immediately realised that the national education was impossible without a good policy on documentation organization. In this way a center for pedagogical documentation was launched in 1963. The mission of this center was to supply documentation to the school communities.

In 1968, the legislation documentation services defined the goals of a Documentation Division in the Secretariat of the state for the National Planning and Development as follows:

- " to centralize all documentation relevant to Rwanda especially those concerning studies, reports and projects carried out by the experts at the end of their mission " ;
- " to collect the best documentation regarding the planning and the economy of neighboring country " ;
- " to render this documentation accessible to internal and external use, aiming at the scientific and cultural exchanges " .

The objectives defined above indicate, on behalf of the state, the awareness of the need for internal organization and cooperation concerning the documentation and research.

Furthermore, it clarified the importance of the documentation services in the process of the total development of the nation.

It is in this context that various information services were launched. First, in 1964 the Library of the National University of Rwanda was founded, then the National Records office in 1978, and in 1989, the National Library was established.

At the eve of the genocide of 1994, Rwanda had relatively a good number of information services. In addition to the National Records office and the National Library, Rwanda counted over 89 school libraries and more than 10 information centers pertaining to the university.

The public reading was taken care by more than 19 libraries that served as reading rooms, information centers, leisure and socio - cultural activities.

Current situation

The current situation is inherent to the socio-economic and cultural conditions and above all to the exceptional conditions in which genocide plunged the country.

Therefore, during the hard time of genocide, a great number of information specialists were killed or took refuge in foreign

countries.

In addition, some materials from information centers were either destroyed or looted.

For the moment, the information service is trying to reorganize itself but it comes into confrontation with obstacles of various kinds:

- *Financial problems*: Almost the information services don't have financial means for the purchase of up-to-date documents, computers, equipment and the ability to send their employees for in-service training.
 - The information centers are not enough and those existing rarely possess a sufficient and organized documentation.
- *The information system*: up to now no information framework that is structured to mobilize, organize and coordinate the information centers.
 - The *National Library and the National Records office* do not operate properly, mainly because of lack of qualified staff. People who work there are not well paid and prefer to look for "green pastures" some elsewhere.
 - The *registration of copyright*: Before independence, the general governor of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, pronounced circulars regarding the official publications. It is for this reason that circular n° 93/41 of April 8, 1957 stipulated that « all administrative, judicial and military departments' publications regarding the high authority of the General Government are bound by the obligation to be submitted in six copies » to the government's general secretariat in Leopoldville, the present Kinshasa. However, no single text of law regarding the copyright has been passed up to now.
 - The *access to information* remains very much limited. Various factors explain this state of situation. Indeed, not only the lack of the organization of the information system is noted, but also Rwanda counts a high percentage of illiterates even among the intellectuals since most of them don't have a culture of publishing.
 - Moreover, *censorship* is not unknown. Some cases of bleaching the right to expression have been witnessed. These include censorship, intimidation, extreme aggressions against professionals capable of expressing their opinion: journalists, religious, magistrates and advocates of human rights (www.hri.ca/fortherecord1997/bilan1997/vol2/rwanda.htm)

Professional associations

The Association of the Librarians and Archivists of Rwanda (ARBIDA in French acronym), which was launched in May 1992 had to suspend its activities during the genocide of 1994. The resumption of its operation was reinstated in 1998 but still faces operational problems emanating from the lack of funds and experience. Its objectives are:

- Supporting library development, documentation centers and archives services,
- To promote the profession of librarianship, and archivists,
- To participate in the reconstruction of the country's socioeconomic development through the promotion of culture,
- To collaborate with all public or private institutions having information as their preoccupation,
- Contributing to the definition and the setting up of the national policy of documentation and information,
- Contributing to the creation of a National Center for Scientific and Technological Information.

Conclusion

The information system has always occupied a low profile in Rwandan society.

The genocide that has laid a heavy blow on Rwanda did aggravate the situation. It occurred when the structures to reorganize and to coordinate the services of information were going to be set up. The aftermaths of the war are characterized by the effort to recover from the chaos that the country in general and the system of information in particular has been plunged in. Unfortunately this effort is pitted against the innumerable constraints such as financial problems, the insufficient number of professionals, the lack of framework in mobilization and coordination of the information services, the ignorance on the part of the population about their right to information, in few words the lack of a national information system to influence the Rwandan society in its socio-economic and cultural development.

In short, the system of information has been neglected for a long time, and it is high time it should be reviewed in order to play its true role in the total development of the country.