

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Zimbabwe

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Clause 20 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe states that: "Except with his own consent or by way of parental discipline, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of expression, that is to say, freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference, and freedom from interference with his correspondence". Freedom for members of society to freely express their ideas has direct impact on the library services provision of any country because library users will have access to a diverse range of opinions.

Population:	11,439,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 610 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	English, Bantu dialects
Main religions:	Christianity, Animism
Literacy:	85% (1995)
Online:	0,27% (May 1999)

Certain factors, however, have worked against this constitutional requirement, denying citizens freedom of expression, with the ripple effects of denying citizens access to information. These include censorship laws, political interference, the absence and the lack of an adequately developed library infrastructure in the country, language barriers, lack of clear ownership/responsibility of the libraries that served the white citizens before independence, and poverty.

Censorship has always be an enemy to democracy. Like in many other countries, there exists in Zimbabwe the Censorship and Entertainment Control Act, which was last revised in 1996. Through the act, a Board of Censors is set up which reviews the suitability of recorded material for public consumption. In accordance to the Act, the Board shall, among other things:

- Shall not approve any film or film advertisement which, in its opinion:
 - a. depicts any matter that is indecent or obscene or is offensive or harmful to public morals; or
 - b. is likely to be contrary to the interests of defence, public safety, public order, the economic interests of the State or public health; or
 - c. Depicts any matter in a manner that is indecent or obscene or is offensive or harmful to public morals

Under the same Act, no person shall:

- Import, print, publish, manufacture, make or produce, distribute, display, exhibit or sell or offer or keep for sale any publication, picture, statue or record; or
- Publicly play any record which is undesirable or which has been declared by the Board as undesirable

The Act also states that any publication, picture, statue or record imported after the Board has declared that in its opinion it is undesirable, shall be liable to forfeiture and shall be disposed of, shall be disposed as the Board may direct.

In its treatment of periodical literature, which are a major source of current information to the majority of the country's population, the Act states that where:

- Four or more consecutive editions of any publication which is published periodically have been declared by the Board to be undesirable.; and every subsequent edition of that publication is, in the opinion of the Board, likely to be undesirable; the Board may declare all editions of that publication subsequent to the date of the declaration to be undesirable

The Act contradicts the constitution. Interestingly, although last revised sixteen years after the country's independence, the Act has not changed much from what it used to be prior to the country's independence in 1980.

There has been at times undue political interference with the freedom of expression as enshrined in the country's constitution. Despite the fact that there is a Board of Censors in place, politicians have sometimes taken it upon themselves to threaten media. The President himself has at some point made threats to ban independent media claiming that the papers have "manufactured lies" about him and his family. The President and top officials in the ruling party have become touchy about criticism in the face of mounting social and economic problems, and regularly attach privately owned newspapers and magazines as opposition press.

As if the censorship laws and political interference have not done enough to deprive the citizens access to information by blocking the production of media containing certain points of view, poverty among the people and the absence of a well developed library infrastructure have made access to information even more difficult.

The library situation in Zimbabwe is well below the expected standards, largely due to the absence of libraries for the people. Before independence viable public library services existed mainly for the white population, while services for the blacks, where they existed, left much to be desired, especially as the majority of the people did not have access to any library facilities. Even in the schools, the formerly whites only schools had superb library facilities, some of which have been further improved with the advent of new technology. The hardest hit people in terms of library provision in Zimbabwe are the rural people, who, according to the 1992 National Population Census results, constitute over seventy percent of the country's population. Although commendable effort has been made to provide library services to the rural population, largely through the Rural Libraries and Resources Development Programme (RLRDP) which was established in 1990, the majority still have no access to information, hence no freedom of access to information to talk about. The RLRDP has to date managed to establish one hundred and two libraries, mostly in Manicaland and Matebeleland provinces. A few more libraries have been established with Government assistance through the National Library and Documentation Services, or through the efforts of various donor agencies, but these are not enough for the over eight million rural residing people of Zimbabwe.

The library situation inherited at independence was admitted bad, and most professional in the field of library and information services would have thought government was going to act swiftly to redress the situation because as professionals, we understand what a vibrant library service can contribute to national development, but the politicians see otherwise, and resources were channelled towards seemingly more important services such as health and education, without really assessing the contribution information can make to successfully develop these very important social services.

The poverty situation has made freedom of access to information a pipe-dream for the majority of Zimbabweans. It has already been pointed out that the rural population have no access to information due to lack of library facilities in these areas; worse still, the incidence of poverty in the rural areas, according to a poverty assessment study carried out by government, at seventy-five percent, is higher than the incidence of poverty in the urban areas, which stand at thirty nine percent. The study defines poverty as the "inability to afford a defined basket of food and non-food items which are necessary to sustain life". If the people had been rich, then they could have been able to purchase information resources to satisfy their information needs. Unless government comes up with a policy on rural library development to bolster the efforts that have been started by the various donor agencies and non-governmental organizations, it will take ages to make freedom of access to information a reality for the majority of Zimbabweans. Maybe all the parties involved, including the Zimbabwe Library Association, need to re-invigorate pressure on Government to come up with such a policy.

Language has also been a barrier for information, especially the rural people as the majority of the papers are written in English, the official language, which is not necessarily the language that everybody is comfortable with. According to the Zimbabwe Language Association, only twenty percent of the population understand English, hence the over nine million of the over twelve million Zimbabweans do not benefit from media produced in the official language. Books donated from outside the country are always in English, making them inaccessible to the majority, yet the local publishing industry has not yet grown big enough to adequately supply the market. On a positive note, efforts are being made to improve the local publishing industry.

In the big cities of Harare and Bulawayo, the libraries that used to be for the whites during the pre-independence period are threatened with closer, after the respective city council have reduced the grants they give to the libraries. Instead of these libraries being integrated into the municipal library services, the libraries remained independent, but were entitled to receive grant from the respective city councils. The city councils concentrated on establishing library services to the previously disadvantaged population in the high-density residential areas, not realising that with the attainment of independence, a lot of black people who could afford moved into these formerly whites only residential areas, and that they too deserve library services just as much as those in the high-density areas. The libraries are now on the verge of collapse due to financial difficulty, and have been appealing to potential supporters to keep them afloat. The mayors of the two cities have made it clear that their respective councils are not in a position to finance these libraries, and have, instead called on the residents to fund the libraries.

Denial of freedom of expression is an issue that cuts across the entire spectrum of life, hence it should really be everybody's concern, hence library associations should work closely with other organizations fighting for freedom of expression and freedom of access to information. In Zimbabwe we have organizations such as ZIMRIGHTS, the Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace, among others - yet the Zimbabwe Library Association has not yet made an effort to work with any such organizations to press for freedom of expression and freedom of access to information. Instead, the association seems to have helped suppress certain points of view. Two cases prove this point: when a fellow professional librarian from the USA wrote to the association questioning President Mugabe's stance on gays and lesbians' participation at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, the executive dismissed the issue without bringing it to the membership to get their thinking on the matter. In the second instance, at the association's annual general meeting of 1998, when an issue that other members of the profession had found necessary to be debated publicly, one member threatened to bit up another member who was giving evidence on the issue, and the executive never bothered to allow the threatened

member an opportunity to freely express his views, either at that meeting or on another occasion.

The formation by IFLA of the IFLA/FAIFE Committee is clear testimony that libraries, librarians, and library associations have to fight strongly for the right for freedom of expression and freedom of access to information. There is need for collaboration with others stake holders to ensure greater achievement.

Supporting articles:

1. No Access to information; in *The Herald*, 14 October 1998
2. Oldest library threatened with closure; in *The Chronicle*, April 1998 (Actual Date not established)
3. Council cuts grants to better own libraries; in *The Chronicle*, 15 April 1998
4. RLRDP spreads reading gospel in rural areas; in *The Financial Gazette*, 10 September 1998
5. Lack of funds threatens city library operations; in *The Herald*, 15 September 1998
6. City library is a bastion of white conservatism; in *The Herald*, 9 October 1998
7. Languages policy requires will and funds in *The Herald*, 7 September 1998
8. Mugabe threatens to crack down on independent media; in *The Financial Gazette*, July 16 1998
9. Journalists riled by Mugabe's threats; in *Horizon*, August 1998
10. Callous regard for libraries in *The Herald*, 18 September 1998
11. Poverty in rural areas on increase; in *The Sunday Mail*, 2 August 1998