

Strengthening the Madagascar National Assembly:

Mutual Support Takes an International Angle

As librarians we help and support each other regularly. Probably all of you have given assistance at some time to libraries in your city, state, region, and even elsewhere in the country. However, until I had the opportunity to travel to Madagascar as part of a legislative strengthening project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, I had not viewed this mutual aid as international in scope. What assistance could I offer to a library in a far-away country with a different political system, a different language, and a culture and economy that were foreign to me? I discovered that we do have a great deal to share with people in countries that have a shorter experience with democracy, but my biggest discovery was how much the trip changed me and enlarged my perspective on my own country and work.



I first became interested in international programs in 1995, when the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) brought

a delegation from francophone Africa (Bénin, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Niger) to visit the Maine Legislature as part of a study tour of American legislatures. Although this group included one archivist and no librarians, the group was scheduled to visit our legislative library. Since most members of the group had limited English skills, they were accompanied by translators. I decided I should be able to put my college French to use by providing a simple introduction to the library and an explanation of our services. Although my French is far from perfect, I was pleased to be able to communicate directly with such wonderful people who were so interested in the library.

Invitation to Madagascar

Shortly after this visit I received a letter from NCSL asking for applicants for a training group traveling to Africa. I was not selected for this project since the plans did not include a library component. However, in 1998 I was invited to participate in the Madagascar project, which would include an assessment of the library (or Documentation Service) of the National Assembly as well as an evaluation of research services available to the National Assembly. The project also included orientation of new legislators, legislative ethics, and committee functioning. NCSL was a sub-contractor selected by the State University of New York. After the contract was signed, things happened quickly. I prepared by polishing my French, gathering information about

our library, and trying to anticipate what might be helpful to the librarians in Madagascar. NCSL Project Manager Jeremy Meadows sent much helpful information about the project goals and about Madagascar, and also set up a conference call with the other project librarian, Constant Honnougan, Director of the Library of the National Assembly of Bénin, a country in West Africa. Of course, I also had to get a number of shots and a large supply of medicines.

The capital city of Madagascar, Antananarivo (aka Tana), has nearly 700,000 people but hardly any of the services and infrastructure found in American cities of comparable size. We stayed at the Hilton Hotel, the city's only skyscraper, which was quite a contrast with the many muddy streets crowded with people. From my hotel window I watched carts go by pulled by a type of oxen called zebu. A short distance away were a variety of small street vendors, and under the trees outdoor barbers were at work. The beautiful purple jacaranda trees surrounded a lake which was being dredged by hand. In the middle of the lake there is an impressive French World War I memorial, constructed during the French colonial period, which extended from 1895 to 1960. On a hill overlooking the lake sits the shell of the former Queen's Palace, a nineteenth century landmark that burned in a disastrous fire in 1995.



The staff of the National Assembly Library (and the author, back row, right). In the background are some of the locked bookcases that house the collection.

Different Legal Systems Impact Library Operations

We began our work quickly, since Jeremy had scheduled interviews for Constant and me before we arrived. We talked with the service directors and service chiefs of the National Assembly staff offices dealing with legislation, studies, automation and documentation (library services). It quickly became clear that each of these services could be improved by working cooperatively, but the rather complex organizational structure presented difficulties. For example, the studies

service depended on library resources to complete its work, but these two services had been placed in separate directorates without consultation with the service chiefs. As far as we could determine, there were few if any opportunities for these services to meet.

I also began to see how Madagascar's parliamentary system differs from ours. In Madagascar, the executive takes the initiative and the popularly elected legislative body discusses and amends. Members of the National Assembly introduce very few of their own bills, even though the Constitution gives them the right to do so. There is a rather low level of interest among citizens in the actions of the National Assembly, but there is also little opportunity for input. Legislative hearings are not considered public. Instead of hearing from citizens, the deputies receive information from government ministers. The legislative capacity for independent research and analysis seems quite limited. Ultimately many of the deputies don't find it worth their while to attend legislative sessions. The most pressing issue while we were there was the proposal to purchase new 4x4 vehicles for each deputy, which the government opposed. (The deputies later did get their 4x4s.)

The limited capacity to support legislative research could be seen clearly in the library, which suffers serious budget problems. One result is an incomplete set of the *Official Journal of the National Assembly*, a fundamental tool. This and the lack of coordination with the Studies Service often results in staff of the Studies Service going to other libraries to complete their research, spending time in travel that could have been used for analysis. The

library has two computers, one devoted to the catalog and the other used for word processing, e-mail, and Internet access; however, the single line for the phone,



A city scene glimpsed from the author's window in the Hilton Hotel, Antananarivo's only skyscraper. The edge of Anosy Lake is visible, top right.

fax, and Internet connection is definitely a limiting factor. Cataloging of most titles in the collection is very good, and cataloging software common to other francophone legislative libraries is used, which allows production of a union catalog with a powerful search capability. Although traffic in the library is quite high, most use of library materials is limited to newspapers and dictionaries. Some of the staff confided that they never saw deputies in the library. Many titles in the collection, which numbers under a thousand titles, are either outdated or not relevant to the work of the National Assembly; but there are also a number of recent and highly useful titles in the areas of economics, management, and law. However, circulation of these appeared to be low.

As Constant and I worked together, we discovered many similarities in our own

libraries. Constant has spent two and a half months in a legislative library in New Jersey under an NCSL program and has led his library in Bénin to a very high level of service. Among the activities and services common to our two libraries are newspaper clipping and publicity for recent acquisitions. Both of these services were included in our recommendations for the library. Constant brought software to generate bibliographies using the online catalog; we recommended that this be used to produce a list of new acquisitions which then could be posted in the lobby of the Assembly next to the daily schedule. We also recommended that a newspaper clipping service be started to provide access to the articles by topic. (In the future, someone is going to want to revisit the discussion of the 4x4s.) This could be



Rice paddies outside Antananarivo. Rice is a staple in Madagascar and is eaten at nearly every meal.

accomplished without much additional expense, since current staff could quite easily take on the newspaper clipping service. In addition, we recommended that reference books be separated from the lending collection to facilitate reference services, which appeared to be limited to searching the online catalog. Although we were both disappointed that all library materials were in locked cabinets, the real danger of theft prevented us from making a strong recommendation that the doors be removed.

Workshops Highlight Possibilities

Internet access is another area of common ground for Constant and me. Constant is responsible for maintaining the entire legislative site in Bénin, and he worked especially hard to help the Madagascar library staff keep the National Assembly site updated regularly. We interviewed the Internet service provider, who also came to the library to discuss updating procedures. We showed our Internet sites at an Internet



The city of Antananarivo (capital of Madagascar). Anosy Lake, in the foreground, is being dredged by hand. Some of the purple jacaranda trees are visible. At center is the World War I memorial.

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workshop for legislative staff and tried to highlight the value of a site as a research tool. I shared an actual question from a legislator and demonstrated how I had used the Internet to find an article that answered the question. I was able to show the article in French translation, so people could read it themselves and understand how it was relevant. I had also compiled a manual of search documentation for the Internet in French, which I left with the Library staff.

We presented another workshop on legislative library services in Bénin and in the state of Maine. I was pleased by the size of the audience, which numbered about 40, and by the attendance of directors and service chiefs as well as staff. Interest was high, and there were a number of questions. I showed photos of our State House and shared some of our legislative publications. I also tried to describe our tradition of free public library services in the United States and concluded with a short discussion of the importance of legislative libraries. We expect legislators to establish policy in a wide variety of areas in which they are not experts and to dispense public funds wisely, but they can succeed only if relevant information is available to them. In addition, citizens in a democracy need to have information about the work of the legislature and their government to make informed choices, to participate in their government, and to understand the development of the laws that affect them. The legislative library plays a fundamental role in filling all of these information needs. The applause I received following my presentation was my proudest moment.

Personal Gains

Now that I'm home, I realize how much I gained from participating in this project. I know now that it is possible to look at a situation very different from your own and use what you know to analyze the issues and make suggestions. I'm more aware now of what I *do* know, and I'm proud of what I took for granted before this trip, such as the high level of cooperation among our legislative service offices. My perspective has been broadened from library reference services to embrace all legislative research. I made many new friends, and I am still very impressed by how open and helpful everyone was at the National Assembly. I discovered that language and culture don't have to be barriers. This project offered many challenges and required a great deal of hard work, but I received far more than I gave.

It is a privilege to participate in an international program. I encourage all legislative staff, especially librarians, to look for opportunities to develop contacts with colleagues in other countries. Legislative staff around the world actually have a lot in common these days. We are often working with the same technology, thanks in large part to the Internet, and many of the issues we face are global. As legislative staff, we know how valuable assistance from colleagues can be. International programs give us a way we can extend mutual support to colleagues in other countries, who are striving to support their legislative institutions just as we are. The rewards are tremendous.

Postscript: On Reflection

This article was written shortly after my return from Madagascar, just over a year ago. With a year's perspective, I now have a better understanding of how profoundly I was affected by my experience in Madagascar. Before I left home, I appreciated that assisting the national government of another country was a serious goal, but I gave little thought to the rewards I would receive. I feel extremely fortunate to have had such an exciting opportunity to see my work as a law librarian in a global context.

I treasure the personal relationships I gained through the trip. I've kept in touch with the librarians in Madagascar and with colleagues who participated in the project. I truly appreciate e-mail for keeping in touch, as I've learned that a package can take up to eight months to reach Madagascar! The painting of the Queen's Palace that hangs in my office and the smell of vanilla beans both evoke many special memories of the beautiful country my new friends call home. The sights and sounds will always stay with me.

I found it very satisfying professionally to use what I have gained from my position here and apply it in an entirely new context. I value my own knowledge and experience more highly, now that I have seen how they are valued elsewhere. I no longer take for granted the resources that support my work, as I know now that they are not available in other parts of the world. The trip itself was a unique professional experience that I feel privileged to be able to share with colleagues here. Although I was called a consultant, I'm sure I learned much more than I shared with people in Madagascar.

Did the parliamentary staff and librarians find what we shared useful and encouraging? The library since has conducted a successful open house, and I hope the librarians will continue to market library services and publicize new acquisitions. The parliamentary Web site does not appear to have been updated, but there have been major disruptions in phone service for the entire country in recent months. Several staff members and parliamentary delegates wanted copies of the materials I gathered on searching the Web, and they all were committed to exploring further. Library staff were very interested in how routine library tasks are performed here, and perhaps our conversations will help them see how they can fully utilize their new computers. Support from the United States to the Parliament of Madagascar continues: six months ago, two parliamentary delegates and one senior staff member visited the United States to meet with state-level legislative colleagues and participate in workshops on ethics, legislative management, and public policies.

Since returning from Madagascar I've discovered that you don't have to travel to meet colleagues from other countries. A visit to the Maine Legislature by a parliamentary delegation from Uganda gave me the opportunity to assist in arranging meetings and workshops with Maine legislative staff. I was especially proud to host a session for the entire delegation in our library. The parliamentary librarian from Uganda arranged to spend an additional afternoon with us. He is the first librarian to serve on the parliamentary staff, and his enthusiasm is wonderful.

It's a common observation that the world is getting smaller, but we all need to make an effort to become global citizens. Participating in international programs has given me much personal and professional satisfaction. I've gained a real sense of pride in my own country and its legal and democratic institutions; they truly are the envy of the world. Our libraries directly support these institutions, and we can help people in other countries understand this.

Seek out opportunities to share with foreign colleagues. The IFLA conference in Boston in 2001 is one upcoming opportunity. Challenge yourself—the rewards are many.

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