

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The Role of Information
and Knowledge Management

The Kenyan Experience

Edited by
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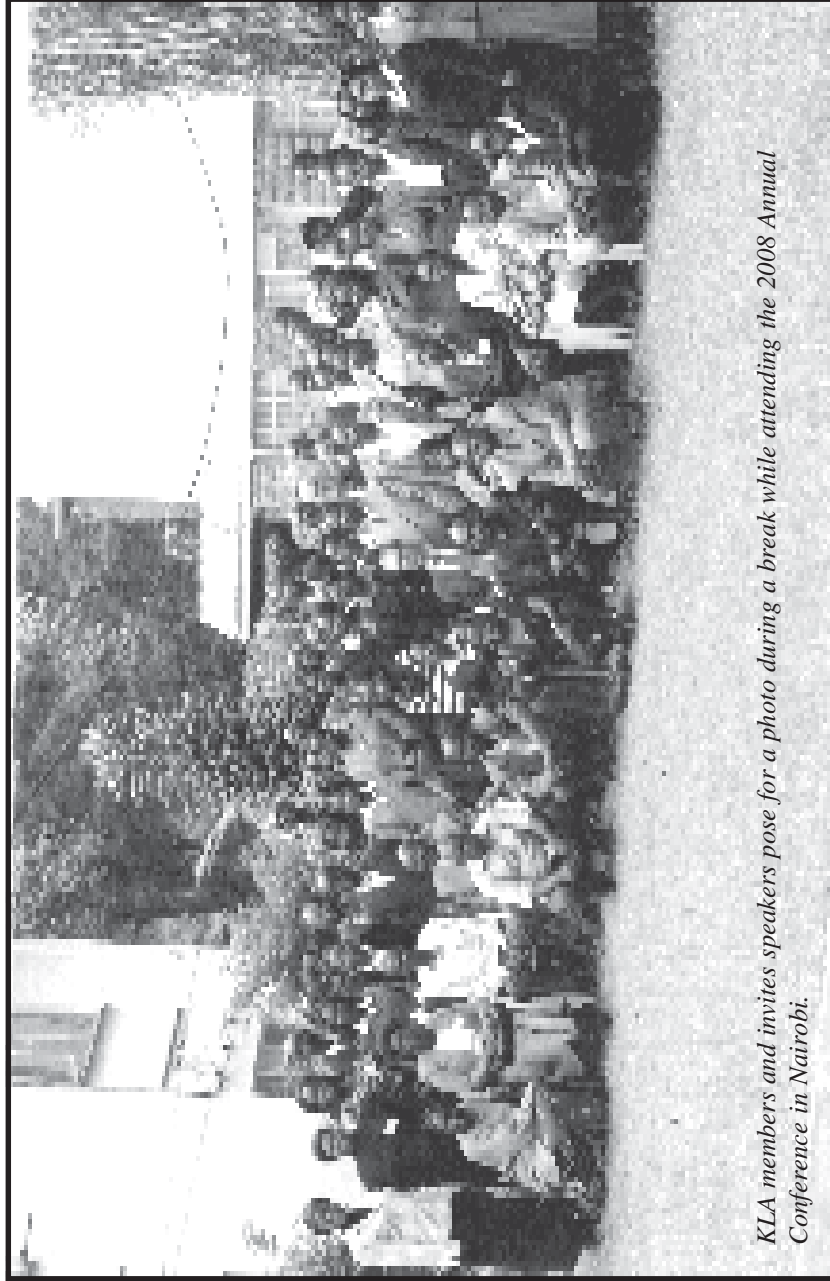
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KLA members and invites speakers pose for a photo during a break while attending the 2008 Annual Conference in Nairobi.

FOREWORD

The Role of Information and Knowledge Management in Conflict Resolution, Peace, Justice and Reconciliation

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Kenya has just been through its biggest crisis since independence. Immediately after the announcement of the results of the presidential elections of December 2007, Kenya experienced a huge wave of violence of a magnitude that was hitherto unimaginable. After the formation of the grand coalition, the Kenyan society is looking back in reflection and beginning to gather the pieces again. But the society views itself as one that no longer understands itself.

It should not be taken for granted that societies will necessarily have a good understanding of themselves. They must come to terms with who they are. To this end, societies require media in which the information needed for this reflection will be made available, which also has to do with the historical dimension of the information. Libraries are preservers and custodians of human knowledge, in which history is retained in a current form. They play a very key social role. Needless to say, societies also had collective memory before the invention of books and systems of writing. Additionally, such media as the internet have also taken up a very pivotal role. Nevertheless, libraries still are the most important places for access to information and for the preservation of memory. In this regard, libraries are more than a storage facility for printed texts. They make use of all possibilities availed by Information and Communication Technology (ICT). As a location, they are also a space for free thinking and free speech, a place where dedicated intellectuals and citizens in general come together. For that reason, libraries are part of the important institutions for a democratic society. Article 19 of the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights says that

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

Any meaningful democratic process requires greater expanse and depth of information resources and the availability of these resources to every citizen at every level in the society. Democracies and libraries are so inextricably linked that the

existence of one without the other is not fathomable (compare the contribution by Fidelis Katonga in this volume).

Libraries are very significant institutions, when social conflicts arise. In research regarding conflict and peace, there is well known theory that conflicts are also based on deficiency of information, whether it is the case of conflicts within the given society or even conflicts between/ among different societies (compare also the contribution by Lilian Gisesa). Cases of misinformation, wrong information or simply missing information enhance disparity in opinions and social differences. A history characterized by violence could also be recorded as a history of disinformation and prejudices (the German history offers a bitter example). Access to high quality information is therefore of great importance of a society like Kenya, whose identity is characterized as one that enjoys much cultural wealth: Kenya consists of a big number of different cultures with their own languages. In the cultural theory of the last decades, it has become clear that the supposition formulated for the first time by Aristotle, that cultures and nations are homogenous entities, is inaccurate. Not only is the Kenyan society not homogenous, but the individual cultures that make up the Kenyan society are also not homogenous. This underscores the even greater importance of an understanding in this social fabric, which is socio-culturally complex. Here, it is a matter of both intercultural and intra-cultural communication. This entails a precise knowledge of the particular histories of the different cultures living together in the society (compare with contributions by Wanja Thairu and Esther Obachi). Only on the basis of this can prejudices be nullified and mortified, and only then is it possible to arrive at consensus and understanding between two cultures. Only then can members of a society appreciate and celebrate the variety that their society has to offer. Compared to Kenya, Germany, in its recent history, has had less experience in being a society with multiple ethnicity. But the German experience has interesting approaches to offer regarding the manner and extent to which libraries have done justice to their responsibilities (compare the contribution by Volker Pirsich).

Furthermore, a society must be in a position to peacefully resolve conflicts that arise. The fact that conflicts arise is part and parcel of the inevitable dynamics of societies (as shown by Esther Obachi). It is possible to resolve such conflicts only on the basis of an existing and available reservoir of knowledge about the issues on which the conflicts are based. This knowledge must be accessible to the decision makers (Wanja Thairu alludes to this) and to the citizens who elect their representatives. If this is not the case, then the society risks that which Johann Galtung refers to as structural and latent violence becomes open violence. Such a society then blindly unleashes its force on elements of the society that do not always have something to do

with the real problems. In this regard, too, we have terrible examples from Germany. South Africa also offers a current example. In Kenya, the conflict tragically broke out along the dividing lines between communities. Even if there are still no comprehensive and conclusive research findings available regarding the crisis after the elections in Kenya, indicators point to the fact that the problems that arose were handled on the basis of ethnic affiliations, however the real issues lie deeper under the surface, from a structural point of view, are more complex, and their causes trace their origins back to the colonial era.

Certainly, the press plays a major role in the availing of information for such reflection. Unfortunately, the press in Kenya is often limited to temporal day to day politics. Equally important is the deep reflection which targets the consciousness at the core of the real problems of the society. It is here that the fast and ephemeral media such as radio and the internet are problematic (compare the contribution by Lilian Gisesa). In this context, libraries and information centres play a pivotal role, especially in the context of a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation commission (compare the contributions by Cary Ouma and Mugalava/Chweya/Nyamboga as well as those by Omukule Emojong, Felix Obegi and Ben Wekalao). Libraries serve the purpose of affording a society a collective memory into which highly valuable information flows. And just for that reason, libraries promote social stability, as has been made clear by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann.

The post-election crisis in Kenya poses a new challenge to libraries and professionals in Kenya (compare among others Fred W. K Kachero). The conference of the Association of libraries meets this challenge and is equal to it. It has tackled a number of issues relating to access to information, particularly the role of information managers and their service to those that seek or need information. It is concerned with the role of librarians and information managers as active players in the process of democratization, of conflict resolution, and of reconciliation. It challenges libraries to consciously develop programs that directly facilitate easy and free access to information. By the choice of this topic, the Association of Libraries shows that it is aware of its responsibility, and also offers insight into how this responsibility will be met.

For purposes of meeting and addressing this challenge, the libraries in Kenya are well equipped. The Kenya Library Association and Kenya National Library Services are among the best library institutions in sub-Saharan Africa and their personnel are among the most committed practitioners in Kenya. They render their services through their network of libraries - state libraries, private libraries and those belonging to

religious and church organizations - not only in big cities, but also in rural areas. In so doing, they play their part in bridging on of the structural problems that Kenya has, that of the disparity between urban and rural centres. And they reach all communities. The Camel Library is one of the exemplary initiatives in this context.

The Goethe-Institut Nairobi has been cooperating with these institutions for many years. This includes workshops, in which librarians from Kenya and Germany exchange experiences and ideas, training visits to Germany by Kenyan experts, exchange projects in Africa, conferences, and projects that promote readership and the book culture. This is a partnership in the form of an exchange – not a one-way-street; and Volker Pirsich will draw the contributions of the conference into the German discussion, just as the Kenyan librarians will draw inspiration from the German experience. This conference is the continuation of a long partnership, and it is clear that it has gained significance to a more intensive degree, considering the difficult times that Kenya has just gone through.

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