

Getting involved in international development activities: UK initiatives and hidden benefits

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Abstract

Jackie Cheeseborough and Shane Godbolt describe the role that UK health information professionals have in global health and in supporting colleagues from developing countries to continue to develop as a provision. They give an overview of a range of organisations working to improve access to health information in developing countries and in particular Sub-Saharan Africa including Book Aid International, HIFA, INASP, ITOCA, Phi, TALC, THET and Research4Life. Even in a recession, many UK health librarians are choosing to get involved in international development activities in low-resource countries by volunteering, and discovering hidden benefits for their own organisations, and their own continuing professional development.

Speedy access to reliable health information for the public and health workers in developing countries remains as necessary as ever and is highlighted by the current Ebola virus disease. In the United Kingdom, we have a role in supporting our international colleagues, particularly those in developing countries, to continue to develop as a profession,

and for them to nurture influence with senior management in their own organisations and at broader governmental level. This editorial provides an overview of a range of organisations working to improve access to health information in developing countries including [Book Aid International](#), [HIFA](#)¹, [INASP](#)², [ITOCA](#)³, [Phi](#)⁴, [TALC](#)⁵, [THET](#)⁶ and [Research4Life](#).

Saving lives through health information is the vision of Partnerships in Health Information (Phi), a charitable organisation working in partnership with African health librarians and others to improve access to accurate, relevant and up-to-date evidence for health professionals and the public in Sub-Saharan Africa. The emphasis is on sustainable results, empowering individuals, continuing professional development and broadening of horizons for all concerned. Phi has three guiding principles: promoting African leadership in health information; supporting evidence-based practice and improving public access to health information and works directly with African organisations and networks to further these aims. Phi collaborates with the [Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa \(AHILA\)](#) and the Information Training & Outreach Centre for Africa (ITOCA), South Africa, to further the profession and facilitates local training in leadership and management. Like, Phi and ITOCA, the Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET) works with a variety of partners in Africa, including Ministries of Health,

¹ Health Information for All

² International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications

³ Information Training and Outreach Centre for Africa

⁴ Partnerships in Health Information

⁵ Teaching Aids at Low Cost

⁶ Tropical Health and Education Trust

Schools of Nursing and Midwifery and Medical schools to improve training for health workers.

A slightly different type of organisation is Health Information for All (HIFA), which campaigns for the right of everyone to have access to reliable, relevant health information, and its vision is that every person and every health worker will have access to the health care information they need to protect their own health and the health of those for whom they are responsible. HIFA connects anyone interested in health information in developing countries with each other via its five active discussion lists, including one in Portuguese and one in French. There has been a great deal of HIFA discussion on the merits of publishing health information on Wikipedia, and although it is not possible to prove direct influence, the open access journal, Open Medicine, has recently published [a formally peer-reviewed and edited Wikipedia article on dengue fever](#), and Maskalyk (2014) describes the process that has been and will be followed and believes that this innovation could increase the amount of free and reliable health information available to clinicians.

The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) works with a global network of partners to improve access, production and use of research and information in Africa, Asia and Latin America, so that countries are equipped to solve their development challenges.

Book Aid International works in partnership with libraries in Africa providing books, resources and training including on medicine, nursing and health. Research4life facilitates access to research for the

developing world and its health programme, Access to Research in Health Programme (HINARI) was set-up by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in collaboration with major publishers in 2002 and provides free or low-cost access to major health and social sciences journals to not for profit organisations in developing countries. Anyaoku and Anunobi,(2014) in their study, which measured HINARI use in Nigeria, speak of the positive impact of this initiative, which was set-up to improve health research in low income countries. Another small charity which makes material available to low income countries is TALC (Teaching-Aids at Low Cost), which aims to improve the health of children and increase medical knowledge in developing countries by providing and developing learning materials in the local languages and relevant to the local context.

Skilled health librarians are extremely important, as much in the UK as in developing countries. During a recession, it can be easy to become inward looking, but as a profession we have to be outward looking and, despite decreasing budgets and increasing workloads, many health librarians in the UK continue to choose to engage with supporting developments in low income countries and discovering mutual benefits. In 2012, Longstaff (2012) published the results of research commissioned by the NHS North East Strategic Health Authority, which found that health professionals returning from developing countries came back motivated to develop new approaches to service delivery, approaches which would be better value for money, and felt that the experience gave them professional development they could not get elsewhere. Those working overseas developed higher level skills relevant to the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (NHS, 2004) and

the NHS Leadership Framework.(NHS, 2011) The Public Health Directorate, International branch (Department of Health, 2014) has recently published its framework for voluntary engagement in global health by the UK health sector. This report highlights the value of international volunteering for everyone involved, for host institutions in low and middle income countries, volunteers and their UK health organisations.

[CILIP's Health Libraries Group \(HLG\)](#), the [University Health and Medical Librarians Group \(UHMLG\)](#) and [Scottish Health Information Network \(SHINE\)](#) are all institutional members of Phi, demonstrating our need to remain aware of global health, work collaboratively to help save lives and learn from each other. The websites of the organisations listed below give information on how you and your library and information services can get involved.

For more information on the long and distinguished history of Phi's work in partnership with health librarians and libraries in Sub-Saharan Africa, read Shaw.(2013)

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This article was published in *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 32(1) in March 2015. The original version can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1111/hir.12096>.