

Title: Unhiding African collections at the British Library for Development Studies

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More details/abstract: The British Library for Development Studies serves as the library of the Institute of Development Studies, but it also has a wider remit in supporting development research globally, funded by the UK Department for International Development. The collection has been built up over 50 years and consists of over two hundred thousand titles and over one million physical items, making it the largest collection of economic and social development materials in Europe. Over half of these items originate from developing countries, including development plans, budgets, national accounts, statistical yearbooks, and census reports for nearly all African and Asian nations. Much of the stock is believed to be unique - 42% of the catalogued holdings at BLDS do not appear elsewhere in WorldCat's global holdings. This percentage is probably much higher when uncatalogued holdings are taken in account, so much of the library's recent work has focused on exposing these unique materials more effectively. This article will discuss various 'unhiding' projects at BLDS, chiefly digitisation and the BLDS Digital Library, but also journal indexing and retrospective cataloguing/conversion.

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UNHIDING AFRICAN COLLECTIONS AT THE BRITISH LIBRARY FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

by Rachel Playforth

British Library for Development Studies

Introduction

The British Library for Development Studies¹ serves as the library of the Institute of Development Studies², but it also has a wider remit in supporting development research globally, funded by the UK Department for International Development. The collection has been built up over 50 years and consists of over two hundred thousand titles and over one million physical items, making it the largest collection of economic and social development materials in Europe. Over half of these items originate from developing countries, including development plans, budgets, national accounts, statistical yearbooks, and census reports for nearly all African and Asian nations. Much of the stock is believed to be unique - 42% of the catalogued holdings at BLDS do not appear elsewhere in WorldCat's global holdings. This percentage is probably much higher when uncatalogued holdings are taken in account, so much of the library's recent work has focused on exposing these unique materials more effectively. This article will discuss various 'unhiding' projects at BLDS, chiefly digitisation and the BLDS Digital Library, but also journal indexing and retrospective cataloguing/conversion.

Retrospective conversion

The BLDS catalogue went online in 1988, but many of the older documents initially remained hidden. In 1989 the collection comprised 195,000 titles, of which only 15,000 had computerized records. Although the collection continued to grow, stock withdrawals during the 1990s left holdings of just over 200,000 titles, about half of which had online records. Efforts to make these holdings more visible began in 2006 with a series of retrospective conversion projects. The projects focused on pre-1988 government publications from Southern countries, and by 2011 over 23,000 records had been added to the public online catalogue, including complete coverage of Anglophone African government holdings. Although this is a significant achievement, it is still only about 25% of all the items which were not previously on the OPAC. Since close to 4000 hours and over £30,000 were spent on dedicated retrospective conversion over 5 years, it's clear that this is resource-intensive work, and as with the other libraries surveyed for the RLUK Hidden Collections report (RLUK, 2012), ongoing funding is a challenge. Resources have now been mostly redirected towards digitisation, possibly because it represents a more visible output in terms of accessible collections and is in line with general moves towards digital content. However, an element of retrospective cataloguing has been included alongside the digitisation work at BLDS.

Article indexing

Another ongoing area of work, which began in 1990, is the indexing of 175 journals in the BLDS OPAC, making the content more discoverable at an article level. Most of these journals are published in the South and not indexed elsewhere online – African examples include the Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review, the Journal of Social Development in Africa and the African Journal of Reproductive Health. The articles are given detailed subject headings and abstracts are included where possible. This makes the BLDS catalogue effectively an index to the development studies scholarly literature.

Digitisation

The latest project in the British Library for Development Studies' DFID-funded programme aims to open up Southern materials to an international audience from a digital library hosted at BLDS, and also to provide the publishing organisations with their own electronic versions of the materials digitised to use in their own online projects.

Preparations to digitise selected publications began in 2010, with a focus on papers published in series form from research bodies in Africa and Asia; we believed that such collections held knowledge of enormous value, and very little of it, especially the older material, was likely to become available in electronic form. There were also pragmatic reasons for concentrating on this material, rather than other areas of the collection. Firstly, it would be less bureaucratic and easier to obtain permission from universities and research organisations than from governments or commercial publishers, and secondly, by concentrating on series papers we would be able to obtain permission from a single organisation for a large number of documents at once.

Staffing and workflow

Outsourcing the digitisation was considered, but as we were taking on Project Assistants to do related work we decided it would be more efficient for them to do the scanning and digitising along with the other aspects of the workflow. Before any actual digitisation started, the project workers checked and recorded serial holdings on a country by country basis using a combination of catalogue search and shelf checking. They then checked thoroughly whether the documents listed were already available online, and finally identified copyright holders where possible. The same project assistants would later do the physical scanning and OCR of the documents, then upload them to the Digital Library and create an OPAC record if none existed. A total of 7 part-time assistants have worked on the project, mostly PhD and postgraduate students at IDS.

Permissions and licensing

Once holdings and owning organisations had been identified, the project manager would begin to approach the copyright holders for permission. As we wanted to make

the content open, but anticipated there might be concerns about reuse, we offered to digitise the publications under Creative Commons³, but with the relatively restrictive Attribution Non-commercial No-derivatives license. When we did encounter problems obtaining permission, it was for one of three reasons:

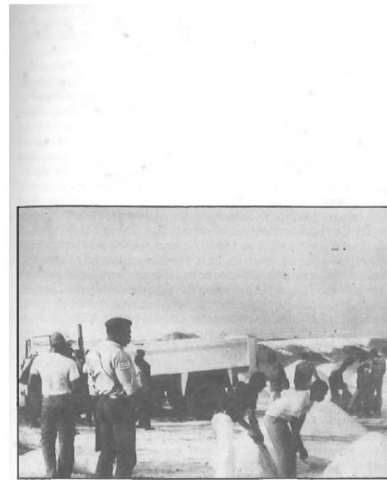
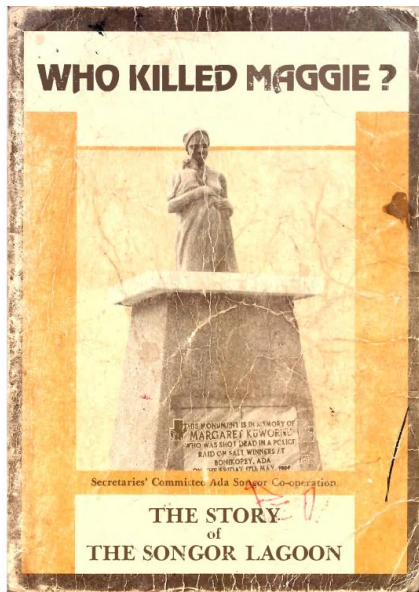
- i) we received no response or had trouble locating a current or relevant contact at the organisation.
- ii) the organisation was concerned about loss of revenue as distribution of their print publications was a commercial activity.
- iii) the organisation had already begun its own digitisation or had plans to (though in many cases this wasn't seen as a barrier and some organisations still liked the idea of being part of a bigger digital collection).

Interestingly we had most success where our main contact was the librarian, even if they didn't make the final decision, possibly because they were familiar with the concepts and trained to see the benefit of access to information.

Populating the Digital Library

Our first agreement to digitise was with the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, which was a great boost to the project as we had hundreds of their papers in our stock. The Digital Library was officially launched in 2011 at the Development Studies Association conference, and 13 more organisations signed up over the next 2 years. There are now more than 1900 full-text papers in the Digital Library⁴.

The project has been a fascinating tour through the evolution of post-colonial social research in various African contexts. The collection from the University of Kwazulu-Natal includes in-depth research into social, employment and housing conditions in urban South Africa in the 1960s and 70s, while the Makerere Institute of Social Research provided complete proceedings of the first annual East African Social Science Council conference from 1966. The University of Nairobi collection features two early discussion papers on labour theory by Joseph E. Stiglitz, and papers from the Centre for Development Studies (based in Kerala, India) contained a 1982 ethnographic study of an Egyptian village by future award-winning novelist Amitav Ghosh. Also digitised was a rare account in book form of the clash between police and members of the salt workers' cooperative at the Songor Lagoon in Ghana, specifically entrusted to BLDS for preservation and wider dissemination. As with many of these items, this is the first and only time the work has been made available online.



Police confiscating salt during one of the raids

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Design and functionality

The Digital Library is built on the open source repository software DSpace⁵, and together with the IDS institutional repository it forms a joint platform called OpenDocs. It is indexed by Google, Google Scholar and repository directories, but also has its own fully searchable and browsable interface. Each organisation represented in the Digital Library becomes what's called in DSpace a 'sub-community', and within that sub-community are collections of individual items. One approach to exploring the material is to simply browse the communities and order or filter the content by title, author, date or subject. There is also an advanced search function for adding further filters and your own keywords, and a discovery feature to refine your search results according to different facets.

OPAC integration

How do you avoid the 'scan and dump' problem of putting full-text content online without telling anyone it's there? Online is not the same thing as discoverable – good metadata and preferably lots of inbound links are required. One small thing BLDS does is add a link to the full text into the bibliographic record of each digitised item (and likewise a link back from the repository to the bibliographic record). This means that if you have found the record via the BLDS catalogue, you're only one click away from the full text. It also multiplies the entry points for both the repository and the catalogue to allow users to discover further resources. Where an item being digitised has no existing OPAC record, one is created as part of the process, so the project has also been an opportunistic way of continuing some retrospective cataloguing work.

Measuring impact 1: the numbers

The Digital Library currently receives around 3000 downloads, and around 1500 unique visitors, each month. The reach is global, and substantial traffic is coming from developing countries, to materials that originate in and focus on those countries. Kenya, India and South Africa all have significant collections in the Digital Library and are in the top 5 locations of users. We also know from Google Analytics that around 75% of the traffic comes through search engines, meaning that people are arriving at papers in the Digital Library through top-level internet searches rather than looking up BLDS/IDS as a known resource or by being referred there by other sites. This could be seen as a double-edged sword in terms of impact; on the one hand search engines with direct links to PDFs are cutting out the middle man, potentially lowering the profile of BLDS as the source and curator of this material. On the other hand this disintermediation achieves the aim of ‘unhiding’ the material, since users can discover it without even needing to know where to look.

Measuring impact 2: demand

It’s too soon to know much about how these papers might ultimately be used, but there are some other impact stories emerging. One interesting tipping point in the project was when we were approached by REPOA (Research on Poverty Alleviation) to ask if they might be represented in the Digital Library, showing that demand had been stimulated independently of the library approaching people. Some existing partners have also supplied documents beyond those already held at BLDS, wanting to expand their collection in the repository and ensure preservation. We’ve also been able to join up our enquiry and document delivery services with populating our own institutional repository; older IDS publications can now be digitised and put online on demand instead of the library sending a single copy to a single requester.

Measuring impact 3: the international picture

There have also been developments within, and beyond, our African partner organisations. Having initially provided our partners with copies of the digitised documents, we then began to offer technical assistance with setting up their own repositories. The Forum for Social Studies in Addis Ababa took us up on this and now has a live repository, but that was only the beginning of wider discussions, learning and capacity building in Ethiopia. A national-level MoU on open access and repositories has been signed by research directors and is to be taken to the Ministry of Education. Similar discussions are happening in Zimbabwe and Malawi (where a National Repository has just been launched).

Next steps

IDS has recently received renewed DFID funding for a programme called the Global Open Knowledge Hub, and as part of this we will continue to add to the Digital Library. Although some material will still come from our own holdings at BLDS, we will also build capacity for more in-country digitisation, providing training and equipment for all stages of the process. Participating organisations will then be able to

submit their publications directly into the Digital Library, and we have a target to add around three times as much Southern-held material as BLDS holdings. It will therefore remain a central hub for African and Asian development research while being populated in a decentralised, Southern-driven way.

¹ See blds.ids.ac.uk

² See ids.ac.uk

³ For information on the Creative Commons international open licensing initiative, see creativecommons.org

⁴ See blds.ids.ac.uk/digital-library

⁵ See dspace.org

References

Research Libraries UK (2012) *Hidden collections: report of the findings of the RLUK Retrospective Cataloguing Survey in association with The London Library*, p. 34, London: RLUK.