

Jamaica to Focus on 'Information For All'

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Jamaica will use its position as Vice President of the United Nations Information Council to ensure that its concerns and course of action in the area of 'information for all' will be reflected in the activities of the Council.

Newly elected Vice President of the Intergovernmental Council for UNESCO's Information for All Programme (IFAP), Professor Fay Durrant tells JIS News that during her two-year tenure, it is expected that significant inroads will be made in developing projects to increase access to information and educate persons in the use of the Internet. "I think it's a very valuable thing for Jamaica, since the members of the Council determine the direction the programme will take during the time that we are there. So we will have an opportunity to ensure that our concerns and the directions that we are following in the area of 'information for all' will indeed be reflected in the activities of the Council," Professor Durrant informs.

Concerns to be brought to the table she says will be that of bridging the digital divide as a means of "ensuring that people in Jamaica have access to information, access to the Internet and can in fact be assured that they can understand how to take advantage of what the Internet offers". "The idea would be to have projects for example in information literacy to ensure that people can access and assess information that they might need," Professor Durrant informs, adding that while the initiatives will be linked to libraries in general the intention is to have them "more widespread throughout the country".

In the meantime she says that of the 39 projects, which were approved by the Council last year, two have been implemented by the University of the West Indies, with others at various stages of completion. She says others will come on stream as soon as the funds become available. While not predicting the number of projects to be completed under her watch, the Professor offers that although it was difficult to say, "it probably will be about the same 30 something that will be done over the next two years". Since her election in March of this year, Professor Durrant says she has begun research on the implementation of the Access to Information Act, which came into effect in 2004, as there is a link between her responsibilities for IFAP and the Act. "There is a relationship, and we have three areas: Information Literacy, Preservation of information in the digital format and information ethics under which the ATI Act would fall," she informs.

Currently research is being done on how the Act has been implemented so far. Part of that effort has resulted in a submission to the review committee for the Act, which completed its public hearing at the end of March. She says the findings of the study will also be circulated to interested parties who are interested in making policy suggestions. In terms of possible amendments she says it is anticipated that there will be "further adjustments as the Act continues to be implemented".

As part of her responsibilities she is expected to attend meetings every six months relating to the development of the programme and evaluate projects that have already been done and determine new areas in which projects will be implemented. On striking a balance between her new role and present duties as Head of the Department of Library

and Information studies at the UWI as well as personal responsibilities she says confidently, "well its all par for the course you know, at the University we seek to make linkages with activities and national priorities and I came to be on the Council because I am the Chair of the Information for all Committee of the Jamaica National Commission for UNESCO so there we bring together representatives of various agencies, libraries and other information organizations to ensure that we identify priorities and policies that are meaningful". She says after the two year tenure it was hoped that the group would be able to continue interfacing with the committee whether or not Jamaica remained on the Council. "But that is to be seen; that will depend on what happens during the two year period," she points out.

Professor Durrant has served 38 years in the Library and Information sector, which have been spent in teaching and researching the definition of national and regional information systems and strategies. She has played a leading role in Latin America and the Caribbean in the development of information policies and strategies in the use of interactive communication technologies, particularly the Internet.

The Council presently includes Angola, Austria, Belgium, Cameroon, Canada, China, Congo, Czech Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Madagascar, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Poland, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uruguay and Venezuela.