

# MALICO VSATs Network Initiative is Implemented!

By Margaret E. Ngwira

**T**he second birthday of the Malawi Library and Information Consortium (MALICO) witnessed the formal launch of its VSAT network. There, on Chancellor College Library roof, surrounded by the beautiful mountains of Zomba, a large group of people were gathered celebrating the culmination of an initiative that had started more than two years earlier. The celebration ceremony was held on the roof, where the VSAT dish is comfortably mounted, linking the Zomba academic and learning community with the digital world!

## **The Regional context: content and connectivity**

Over the last few years, groups of libraries have been coming together to form consortia to streamline several of their functions, and to give them a cost advantage in purchasing access to electronic journal articles. Universities and other learning and research institutions in Malawi are beneficiaries of several initiatives that bring quality e-content to the teaching, learning and research community. This content includes access to e-journals at reduced rates, through the INASP PERI project access made available through the Open Society Institute's Electronic Information for Libraries (eIFL) network project, the FAO and WHO. In addition, Open Access resources such as BioOne and BioMed Central are supported by Malawi Academics. But when these resources became available, slow connectivity made utilisation almost impossible. This resulted in a waste of expensive resources and major frustration on the part of the potential users.

MALICO was founded in May 2003 and is now a registered Trust with seven members from the academic, research and development community. Among the members of the Consortium are the University of Malawi and Mzuzu University. Improved connectivity, access to e-content for MALICO members and training in its use are among the core functions of MALICO.

## **Regional groupings and the birth of the VSAT concept**


Individual library consortia are grouped into regional consortia. One of the OSI initiatives is eIFL network of library consortia from transitional and developing countries. Several members of eIFL are within the OSISA area – e.g., the Zimbabwe University Libraries Consortium (ZULC), the Lesotho Library Consortium (LELICO) and MALICO. All these consortia were supported by OSISA to get started.

At the General Assembly of the eIFL Network in St Petersburg Russia in Dec 2002, Southern African librarians requested eIFL to address the problem of slow Internet access. eIFL agreed to consider assistance to improve bandwidth for these consortia. With the support of the OSI Board, the issue was addressed and handed over to OSISA to take further. In May 2003, OSISA suggested that VSATs were a logical way forward. MALICO was accepted as a pilot, with a VSAT network to be established under the leadership of OSISA.

## **MALICO VSATs – the process**

Through OSISA support, working through the CSIR, an expert was identified and worked in consultation with MALICO's technical advisor to draw up a request for proposals for a tender process. The process involved site visits to ensure stakeholder buy-in. Business plans had to be developed at each site to show plans for viability. A request for proposals was drawn up and lobbying the Malawi Communications and Regulatory Authority (MACRA) began.

The tender process was completed and Taide in Norway was selected to provide the VSATs. The bandwidth comes from their parent company, Telenor. Supplementary funding had to be sought. The OSI, World Bank Malawi (EDRP Project) and the University of Malawi Dossani Trust contributed to the project and the four VSATs were mounted on three University of Malawi campuses and at Mzuzu University in February 2005.

Thus, a long journey has begun! On the horizon are visions of a National Education and Research Network (NREN) with the MALICO connectivity as backbone. Fibre options are also being investigated in the long term. Several pieces of the connectivity jigsaw puzzle for Southern Africa are now successfully in place, but the challenge continues to extract the maximum benefit for the most people from connectivity in our region. Many thanks OSISA from MALICO! 

*Margaret Ngwira is eIFL – Malawi Coordinator and MALICO Secretary.*

*Her contact is [mengwira@kcn.unima.mw](mailto:mengwira@kcn.unima.mw)*