## The fight to remove VAT on books in South Africa

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n his latest budget, the Finance Minister of South Africa, Trevor Manuel, has approved the continuing imposition of a 14 per cent VAT on books. Sales tax (or VAT) was first introduced in South Africa at the rate of 4 per cent in 1978, with vocal opposition from the information community, including librarians, publishers and booksellers.

The imposition of this tax seems paradoxical and counter-productive. The South African Government is continuing with this source of income while attempting to improve the country's economy: perhaps a reconsideration of the chicken and egg conundrum is overdue. It is extremely difficult to have a democratic, productive and peaceful society without information and education, which rely on documents being available.

Literacy rates in South Africa are already low, and there are hardly enough places at schools to accommodate, support and retain students until they have completed their studies. The absence of books compounds this problem. As a result, libraries have the potential to play particularly significant roles in their communities. However, many librar-

ies in South Africa are now finding themselves unable to purchase materials. Lack of access to appropriate information could be seen as depriving people of basic democratic rights, or even human rights. As a local comedian, Pieter-Dirk Uys, has pointed out, it is insane that an AK-47 (rifle) should cost less than a JK Rowling (book).

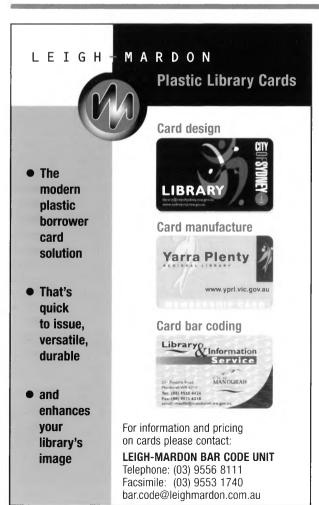
It is ironic that sales tax is reduced for books in many countries, particularly those in the Majority World, such as Ghana. VAT appears to exist on books only in richer countries, such as Denmark, Australia and New Zealand (see, for example, the chart at <a href="http://www.ipa-uie.org/statistics/vat.html">http://www.ipa-uie.org/statistics/vat.html</a>). Manuel, however, has argued that the removal of this tax will be too complicated, as there are many different kinds of books—textbooks, children's books, prescribed books, coffee-table books and so forth—indicating that some kind of formula would differentiate between them.

The anti-VAT campaign was at first led by the National Library, which has now issued a statement that removing VAT on books will not solve the problem of expensive books. This may well be the case.

Thus, the most important issue at stake seems to be cultivating the idea that information can enrich people in many ways: 'reading' is not restricted only to recreation or entertainment. There are values in learning what others have thought, experienced and created; there are values in community, cultural, organisational and institutional memories. These values include the enrichment of our understanding of reality, improved problem solving and decision making.

Many information workers in South Africa believe that removing the 14 per cent VAT on all books will assist their work — and support the work of the government in the long term. If you wish to lend your support to the professional groups in South Africa who are working towards this end, please contact one of the individuals mentioned below, or send an e-mail directly to the Finance Minister, Trevor Manuel.

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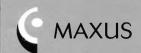
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