

Leaders' Conversations: National Libraries in the Post-COVID-19 World



On 18 September 2020, the International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA) Regional Office for Asia and Oceania and the National Library Board, Singapore jointly organised the inaugural Leaders' Conversations. The Leaders' Conversations is a new digital platform for leaders in the region and beyond to share their insights on major developments in the library world. This initiative received great support from IFLA and the IFLA Regional Standing Committee of the Asia and Oceania Section, and is aligned to the IFLA Global Vision.

The first series of the Leaders' Conversations focused on the future of the libraries in the Post-COVID-19 world. The inaugural conversation was held with the leaders of the National Libraries. The subsequent sessions are with the Public Libraries and the Academic Libraries, respectively.

Opening Address by Ms Christine Mackenzie, President, IFLA

In her opening address, Ms Christine Mackenzie opined that the organisation of the Leaders' Conversation was timely to gather the leaders of the national libraries in the region together to share their experiences in this difficult time. The pandemic brought challenges and opportunities. IFLA is using this period to rethink its platforms and processes, to be more innovative about how IFLA interacts with the units and volunteers in the library field.

One of the most important roles of libraries, regardless of the pandemic threat, is advocating for the United Nations Agenda 2030 to create a sustainable and fairer world. IFLA has advocated for the inclusion of access to information, universal literacy, access to Information

and communications technology (ICT) and cultural heritage in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A collection of stories from libraries around the world showing how they are helping to achieve the targets can be found in IFLA's Library Map of the World website.

Ms Mackenzie's presidential theme is, "Let's work together". She believed that libraries need to think strategically about partnerships and work together with other library institutions and library associations. Libraries should forge partnerships with like – minded organisations that have the same goals and values. She hoped that the Leaders' Conversations will lead to more collaboration opportunities for national libraries to strengthen their ties.

"Let's work
together."

Christine
Mackenzie

Presentation by Mr Rao Quan, Director, National Library of China (NLC)

Mr Rao Quan outlined the measures taken by NLC in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Steps were taken to train staff and coordinate the measures to ensure the safety of employees and library users. Although NLC was closed to the public from 24 January onwards, it continued to carry out its work on information collection and special research on disease prevention and control. NLC collected and preserved literature on COVID-19. It is working with libraries across the country to build a repository of the efforts in China's fight against the pandemic. More than 20,000 resources have been collected so far.

NLC also expanded the access of databases to its online users and put together online reading resources through multiple channels. These measures were implemented to support those studying at home. In addition, NLC worked with new media platforms to launch a series of reading promotional activities such as reading contests. During this period, staff worked from home and were provided with online training to improve their professional capabilities. A workplan was developed to coordinate pandemic control and library development. NLC reopened from 12 May.

While the pandemic posed a severe challenge, Mr Rao Quan opined that it served as an opportunity for the local librarianship to make profound changes. These include the need for libraries to:

- a. Improve security and emergency response capabilities in the face of public health incidences.
- b. Speed up the efforts to adapt to the new digitally connected and intelligent world. There is an exponential growth of online services among libraries which makes service innovation with new technologies an inevitable channel in the future.
- c. Improve the value of libraries by improving public information literacy and enhancing public governance capabilities. Since the outbreak, the public have fallen victim to misinformation, bringing pressure to social governance and stressing the libraries even more.

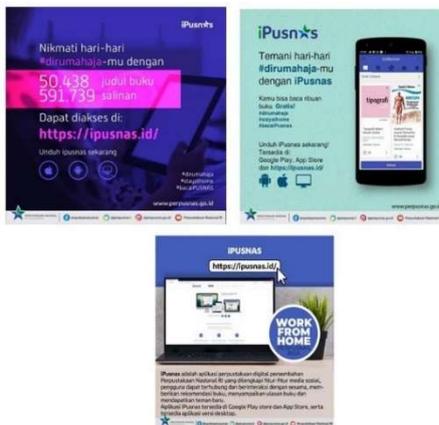
To deal with the challenges, Mr Rao Quan proposed some aspects that libraries can focus on. Firstly, libraries should accelerate the formation of regulations and standards in the building of safe library space design and collections, and conduct training on emergency drills and public information literacy education to support and guide other libraries in the country. Secondly, libraries can enhance the research on the application of new technologies like 5G, big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence to design a national smart library network and smart transformation of library spaces, resources and services to meet public demand for timely reading of materials at home.



Thirdly, libraries should promote open exchanges and cooperation among libraries and with other social institutions, push for online integration and sharing of resources from various fields, and make the access to reading materials more convenient and flexible. Mr Rao Quan also shared that NLC is currently in the process of formulating the development plan for 2021 to 2025.

Presentation by Ibu Woro Titi Haryanti Salikin, Prime Secretary, National Library of Indonesia (NLI)

Ibu Woro Titi Haryanti Salikin presented the efforts of NLI in providing library services during this period. She said that the pandemic period can bring opportunities for libraries because library services are increasingly sought after and in demand when people stayed at home for



extended periods of time. NLI had provided digital library services via the iPusnas mobile app and launched Coronapedia to provide the community with credible and quality information about COVID-19. The information on Coronapedia is curated by librarians. NLI also provided access to e-resources, including e-journals and digital manuscripts), and the Onesearch portal, which connects more than 1,500 libraries within Indonesia.

Librarians at NLI continued to offer the 'Ask a Librarian' service online, which is equipped with a live chat function, to help users with their information needs. Besides online reference services, librarians were engaged with campaigns via social media platforms to encourage users to explore NLI's collections. These efforts have drawn more millennial users to its collections and facilities. As physical facilities were closed to the public, NLI provided free usage of its Zoom account for the public and the Zoom webinar facility was very popular with users.

A unique feature of the NLI is its radio streaming service. NLI has its own radio station to inform people about its services, collections and promotional activities. The station is managed by librarians, who broadcast every morning, afternoon and evening. Guest speakers such as writers, storytellers and musicians are invited to talk about their expectations of NLI and how the library services have been useful to them.

Presentation by Mdm Maizan binti Ismail, Director, National Library of Malaysia (NLM)

Although the pandemic was a challenge to NLM's operations, NLM adapted and adopted new technologies in delivering libraries services to meet its users' needs. Mdm Maizan binti Ismail highlighted NLM's digital platform, u-Pustaka (Ubiquitous Library) which provided users with access to 13 million digital items. Usage of u-Pustaka had grown during the period. NLM also utilised its social media platforms to communicate with users and promote its online services and resources.



Mdm Maizan proposed that libraries can reinvent themselves in the post COVID-19 world in the following ways:

- a. Leverage on online platforms to provide new ways of accessing resources and reinvent services and activities. NLM also strengthened access to online resources by providing more e-books and e-resources and digitising more print resources.
- b. Allow libraries to show their capabilities. The pandemic had allowed NLM to show its capabilities and value to stakeholders, thereby making it critical to allocate budget to the library to strengthen its ICT infrastructure and digital content.
- c. Create stronger bonding with users and improve efficiency in service delivery.
- d. Reach out to non-users and users who have stopped visiting the library. Through intensified promotions on its social media platforms, NLM had seen an increase in the number of registered users and e-book loans.
- e. Provide opportunities for librarians to pick up new ICT skills like virtual meetings, organising and promoting online activities. Libraries need to provide technology trainings for staff and prepare them to be ready for crises.
- f. Strengthen cooperation with other libraries. NLM continues to strengthen its cooperation and share knowledge with other libraries in Malaysia and internationally.

Presentation by Mr Bill Macnaught, Director, National Library of New Zealand (NLNZ)



Mr Bill Macnaught highlighted that during the lockdown, the New Zealand Cabinet agreed to provide local libraries and librarians with NZ\$60 million over the next two years, to support the increased demand for resources and information from the public. With the funding, NLNZ hoped to demonstrate libraries' new value to the communities, aiming to create more than 170 jobs in libraries in the areas of digital inclusion,

workforce development, leadership training, community engagement and digital content creation, etc. It also planned to extend free Wi-Fi in public libraries which is an important social facility especially for the less advantaged groups.

In the future, NLNZ expects to see more digital services being developed and more nationwide collaboration across the library sector. It will strengthen support for collaboration across the Pacific islands and partnership with libraries in Australia. It will also be looking at new ways

of working. Mr Macnaught agreed that partnership is a key focus for NLNZ since the funding was based on partnerships across the library sector.

Presentation by Ms Dolores Carungui, Chief Librarian, National Library of the Philippines (NLP)

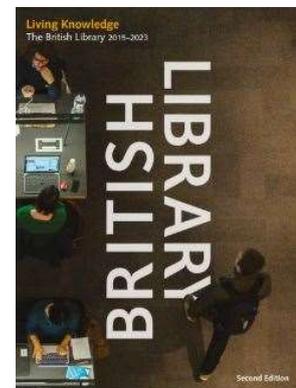
Ms Dolores Carungui shared that the NLP started its lockdown on 16 March and is still under general community quarantine. Staff at NLP worked from home with a skeletal staff working arrangement began on 8 June. NLP also shifted all its services online and provided users access to e-resources.

NLP faced several challenges during this period such as a shortage in manpower and lack of communication as staff were not tech-savvy and did not have stable Internet connections. There were also no guidelines, best practices and systems available on safe library operation that NLP could follow. When NLP enters general community quarantine, it planned to implement reduced hours and capacity, providing 50% of seating capacity by appointment.

With NLP's larger budget, NLP will invest in e-resources, equipment and IT training for staff. It also hopes to organise an online conference for ASEAN libraries on Capacity Building in Library Services: Reframing Libraries, Setting the New Normal in November 2021.

Presentation by Mr Roly Keating, Chief Executive Officer, British Library (BL)

Mr Roly Keating outlined the experiences of BL during the pandemic and its longer-term strategies in the future in his presentation. BL was closed on 18 March due to the lockdown with most staff working from home. BL moved very quickly to send the message out to its users that it was still open via provision of its digital content and services. BL reopened partially with three reading rooms and limited hours on 22 July, allowing in only reader pass holders.



With the top priority being the safety and welfare of the staff and visitors, many signs and graphics were put up around the building. Despite some frustrations over the limited space and operating hours, feedback was generally positive. A second phase of opening occurred on 18 August, offering about 90% of collections, 45% of study areas and 30% of the normal operating hours. Mr Keating felt that while digital was one of BL's great successes over the past six months, spaces are still vital for national libraries as spaces are where the community come together.

In response to the pandemic, BL intended to publish a new chapter in its guiding strategy document, *Living Knowledge*, next month. This document will focus on BL's national recovery priorities for economic growth and innovation as well as social and cultural renewal. BL had secured funding which would be used to accelerate the support for public libraries and to launch a digital service to provide small businesses with information to help job creation. BL planned to invest more in its strategies around science to foster public understanding of science in public policy. It will also build connections with public libraries to establish a living knowledge network and a digital service to promote libraries.

In the longer term, Mr Keating pointed out that new ways of hybrid working will become the norm in libraries. Libraries are likely to adopt a digital-first approach in its operations and services. He hoped that the value of libraries as the crucial safe space for mutual support and interaction will be reinforced.

Presentation by Mr Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer, National Library Board, Singapore (NLB)

Mr Ng Cher Pong touched on the simple framework that NLB had adopted to guide actions, initiatives and responses during the pandemic outbreak – strategic and tactical. The former is in line with NLB’s long-term transformations for libraries, while the latter refers to business continuity measures which would be scaled back in the long run.



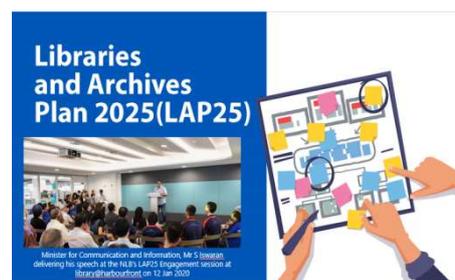
One of NLB’s strategic responses is the launch of the Documenting COVID-19 project in Singapore. This project calls for individuals, communities and organisations to contribute materials that document their experiences of the pandemic in Singapore. In addition, it enabled community engagement and led

NLB to think preserving information from digital formats such as Twitter, which it had not collected previously. NLB has also ramped up its provision of digital content, including the access to local newspapers to the patrons. Learning packages that help people to understand topics such as pandemics and mental wellness were also produced to enhance NLB’s digital offerings.

In terms of tactical responses, the libraries were closed for almost 3 months. Currently, the libraries have returned to normal operating hours with safe-distancing measures applied such as the closure of seating areas in public libraries and regular cleaning of seats in the National Library. Users are encouraged to secure slots online before entering the libraries.

Mr Ng also outlined the Libraries and Archives Plan 2025, which maps out NLB’s priorities for the next five years, and the four key shifts that it encompasses:

- a. Beyond reading to learning
- b. Beyond books to programmes
- c. Beyond collecting materials to engaging citizens
- d. Beyond physical and digital to omni-channel



He noted that it was imperative that libraries thought about the roles they could play amidst the social, economic and political challenges in society. He added that NLB was also thinking about its changing role in the community in four areas:

- a. Lifelong-learning champion – supporting the re-learning of skills, particularly when jobs in the post-COVID-19 world would likely be different;
- b. Social equaliser – reaching out to seniors to provide assistance with basic digital skills so that they are not left behind;
- c. Information literacy – addressing misinformation and build an informed citizenry; and

- d. Social connections – building an engaged citizenry through learning communities.

Question and Answer Segment

Can NLC elaborate on its technical cooperation with companies, particularly in the area of artificial intelligence? – Mr Gene Tan, Moderator

Mr Rao Quan replied that NLC is currently at the preliminary exploration stage with Huawei and Yue Wen, with an agreement signed between both parties to signify the intention to cooperate. NLC and Huawei have jointly set up a laboratory to research on technologies that can be applied in libraries. It is also working with Huawei and China Communication Import and Export Corporation on building a 5G online reading system, slated to come online at the end of the year.

How do libraries remain relevant to stakeholders through their involvement in their countries' economic growth and development? – Mr Gene Tan, Moderator

Mr Roly Keating said as the national patent library, the British Library (BL) is focused on building services for start-ups, inventors and innovators. This includes building of spaces, provision of access to information in terms of databases and market research information, and provision of expert librarian support in intellectual property and idea development. In comparison to other formal business support, BL is seen as more welcoming as it is inclusive and non-judgemental. This service is provided through BL's IP Centre. In the post-pandemic world, libraries can be places for people who have lost their jobs to seek assistance and help themselves through BL's networks. This is one way to convince the government that libraries are valuable in the community.

Mr Bill Macnaught shared that NLNZ is looking at helping people build new skills. With the funding it has obtained and plans to support job creation, it can better demonstrate its economic value and other values to the community.

How has the role of libraries been reshaped by the digital environment? – Mr Gene Tan, Moderator

Mdm Maizan binti Ismail shared that apart from u-Pustaka, NLM launched the National Library of Malaysia TV channel on YouTube to offer various library services. NLM broadcasts its activities and programmes online via this channel, such as putting up its rare Malay manuscript for online viewing. It also provided guidance to other libraries in Malaysia in the areas of standard operating procedures (SOPs), new norms and reopening.

What kind of new partnerships will NLB be developing to move beyond the library sector and achieve the greater goals? – Dr Marie-Louise Ayres, Director General, National Library of Australia

Mr Ng Cher Pong explained that NLB will be developing partnerships along two fronts. The first will be in championing lifelong learning, where NLB hopes to work with technology firms to showcase how technology such as artificial intelligence can be used. The second will be to

anticipate customer expectations, where NLB hopes to explore the possibility of delivering books to people with through partnerships with logistics companies. This idea arose from the observation that people have become accustomed to delivery services during the lockdown.

What are the social roles that libraries can play to help people get back on their feet, especially in a post-COVID-19 world? – Mr Gene Tan, Moderator



Ibu Woro Titi Haryanti Salikin said that amid the pandemic, mobile libraries and motorcycle deliveries continued to bring books to the community. NLI helped develop about 500 village libraries as part of a national priority project to provide them with resources and training and to help them work with local stakeholders on issues like funding. NLI also collaborated with telecommunications companies and the National Bank to offer free Internet access in the village libraries. As more government officials are aware of the importance of libraries, village libraries receive more funding and new library buildings are built at the district and provincial levels.

Ms Dolores Carungui shared that NLP continued with its literacy programmes in the community. It has a book cart programme that offers storytelling sessions, activities and food for street children and serves persons with disabilities, providing materials in alternative formats such as Braille.



Are there any national libraries in the region that actively engage government regulators and internet societies to combat hate speech and misinformation online? – Mr Winston Roberts, Senior Advisor, National Library of New Zealand

Mr Ng Cher Pong mentioned that NLB has worked with different groups interested in fighting against misinformation. Mr Gene Tan added that NLB has a S.U.R.E (Source. Understand. Research. Evaluate.) campaign which works actively with schools to combat misinformation and teaches students on how to evaluate information sources.

Ibu Woro Titi Haryanti Salikin shared that NLI worked closely with the Ministry of Communications and Technology to filter hate speech. In addition, staff and reading ambassadors constantly make attempts to raise the awareness of critical reading and cross-referencing in the community.

Will libraries get bigger or smaller after the pandemic? – Mr Gene Tan, Moderator

Mr Roly Keating believed that libraries face a real economic risk of becoming smaller due to limits in public funding, which many governments will face. In the long run, the power and durability of library networks need to be understood by the government, so it depends on library professionals to demonstrate their skills and capabilities in the next three crucial years.

Mr Rao Quan felt that every country's situation is different. In China, the sentiment is still optimistic. While there is a limit to the growth of physical libraries, there is no limit to the growth of digital libraries. There is a strong connection between offline and online growth.

Mr Ng Cher Pong opined that there was room for growth if libraries were strategic about demonstrating value and evolving their roles. While people still valued physical spaces for programmes and social interaction at present, it was still unknown if users' preferences may shift in the future.

Mr Bill Macnaught shared that libraries need to be seen to be bigger to change the perception that libraries only play a small part in local government business. The reach of libraries can also grow by working across the whole of government. He felt that libraries have not been included in discussions for too long, yet there is an increasing understanding in the values of libraries now, especially in the area of economic recovery.

Ibu Woro Titi Haryanti Salikin agreed with Mr Bill Mcnaught and believed that librarians should be more creative, increase their visibility and show their usefulness to the community. This would allow governments to see the importance of libraries and allocate more budget to the sector.

Ms Christine Mackenzie remarked that the libraries are receiving more attention from government leaders during the pandemic and we should seize the moment.

Closing remarks by Mr Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer, National Library Board, Singapore

Mr Ng thanked the participants for their time and support in making this session a success and sought their continued support for the subsequent conversations.

Panellists

Ms Christine Mackenzie, President, IFLA

Mr Rao Quan, Director, National Library of China

Ibu Woro Titi Haryanti Salikin, Prime Secretary, National Library of Indonesia

Mdm Maizan binti Ismail, Director, National Library of Malaysia

Mr Bill Macnaught, Director, National Library of New Zealand

Ms Dolores Carungui, Chief Librarian, National Library of the Philippines

Mr Roly Keating, Chief Executive Officer, British Library

Mr Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer, National Library Board, Singapore

Moderator

Mr Gene Tan, Senior Director, Special Duties, National Library Board, Singapore