

We're all in this together: Post COVID-19 Opportunities for International Library Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2022 brought worldwide disruption and suffering. It also made us realize “We’re all in this together”- among all humanity, internationally—as the virus so easily crossed borders worldwide. Amid this global tragedy, examples of international cooperation also arose: distribution of vaccines, coordination of travel safety protocols, cooperation in humanitarian aid, etc. In this same spirit of international cooperation, libraries can consider opportunities for international library cooperation. These include international library associations and conferences, sister-library programs, collaborative partnering, and cross-cultural outreach efforts. This article will highlight these opportunities, noting how such cooperation brings us closer—not only as library professionals, but among all humanity.

KEYWORDS : *International library cooperation; International library associations; Sister libraries; Cross-cultural service; Library outreach; Multicultural populations.*

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2022 was truly a worldwide disaster. The human suffering and loss was tragic, with nearly 487 million infected and over 6 million deaths (WHO, 2022). The economic disruption was also profound, wreaking havoc for all countries, and exacerbating poverty and inequality in developing nations. 2020 saw a global economic growth reduction of 3.4%, with a spike of global unemployment in the millions—not seen since the 1930s Great Depression (UN-DESA, 2022, 1-9).

This global crisis also made us realize “We’re all in this together”—among all humanity, internationally—as the virus so easily crossed borders worldwide. Amid this global tragedy,

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examples of international cooperation also arose. In 2020 the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) alliance was formed, bringing together WHO, UNICEF, the GAVI vaccine alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and over 150 nations, to coordinate global vaccine distribution (WHO, 2020). In 2020 the UN's International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) coordinated with national transportation/aviation agencies worldwide to establish safety protocols for air travel. Their *Take-off: Guidance for Air Travel through the Covid-19 Public Health Crisis* publication—now in the fourth edition as of October 2021—has been a valuable document for ensuring consistency in aviation practices for Covid-19 (UN-ICAO, 2021). And throughout the pandemic, charities in developed nations have coordinated with the UN, and with each other, to ensure vaccines, food, and medical supplies are effectively distributed. For example, the April 2020 “One World: Together At Home” broadcast donation drive brought donors, corporations, governments, and the UN together to raise funds for global Covid relief (Global Citizen, 2020).

These instances of international cooperation serve as an inspiration for libraries. International library cooperation is not a new concept. It has been around for decades, in various forms—from international associations and conferences, to sister library relationships, to 1-on-1 collaboration, to cross-cultural outreach efforts. This article will highlight these opportunities, noting how such cooperation brings us closer—not only as library professionals, but among all humanity.

INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATIONS & CONFERENCES

International library associations and conferences provide excellent opportunities for libraries across borders to share ideas, compare best practices, consider collaborations, and cooperate on mutual concerns. Lists of international library associations can be found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_library_associations, <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/iro/intlassocorgconf/libraryassociations>, or <http://ginfovillage.50webs.org/libassociations.htm>.

IFLA

Certainly, the largest and most well-known international library association is the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA): <https://www.ifla.org>. Its dozens of committees and interest groups focus on all aspects of librarianship (technology, information literacy, preservation, etc.) all types of libraries (national, public, academic, school, etc.), and all regions of world (Asian libraries, African libraries, etc.) These committees and groups, comprised of librarians from around the globe, collaborate to produce valuable products. For example, the Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section committee is comprised of 19 librarians from various countries, and at their committee webpage (<https://www.ifla.org/units/mcultp>) are project items and resources, such as their *IFLA/UNESCO Multicultural Library Manifesto*.

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Some mistakenly think “IFLA is only for high-level library leaders, like heads of national libraries or directors of prominent academic libraries” or “IFLA too expensive for individual, rank-&-file librarians to be a part of.” Both of these are inaccurate. While IFLA does attract high-level library leaders from countries, individual librarians comprise committee memberships as well. And the membership costs of IFLA are adjusted to “a system of differentiated fees based on bands related either to the development status of the country where they are based or the operating expenses of the Member.” (IFLA, 2022a). IFLA also provides financial grants for the registration and (sometimes) travel expenses of its annual conference. (IFLA, 2022b).

Regional

There are also regional international library associations. These offer the benefit of international participation (exchanging ideas, comparing best practices, etc.) but also the *added* benefit of regional commonalities. For example, in the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL) association, members collaborate on library issues relevant to Southeast Asia, such as humidity issues for archives, cataloguing similarities among Malay/Indo/Bruneian works, shared rural-literacy outreach ideas, and so on. Regional associations have not always had success in continuity, such as the dormant Asian Federation of Library Associations, discussed by Kaur (2008). Several regional associations are noted by Dowling (2017). Examples of current regional associations include: the Regional Federation of South Asian Library Associations (<http://refsala.blogspot.com>), African Library & Information Associations & Institutions (<https://web.aflia.net>), Middle East Librarians Association (<https://www.mela.us>), Pacific Islands Association of Libraries, Archives, and Museums (<https://piala-pacific.wixsite.com/piala-pacific/>), Association of Caribbean University, Research, and Institutional Libraries (<http://acuril.org/>), and the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (<http://www.eblida.org/>).

By library type

There are also international library associations based on library type. These afford librarians a unique opportunity: to connect, network, collaborate, and cooperate with other librarians, abroad, in their same type of libraries. For example, school librarians connecting with other school librarians on best practices for reading promotion. Examples of associations by type are: the International Association of Music Libraries: IAML (<https://www.iaml.info>), the International Association of Law Libraries: IALL (<https://iall.org>), and the International Association of School Librarianship: IASL (<https://iasl-online.org>).

SISTER LIBRARIES

Sister Library initiatives have been matching libraries across countries for decades. In past years, this matching was referred to as library “twinning.” Library literature has

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numerous examples of how-to descriptions and success stories, and for different types of libraries. For example, how-to descriptions are found in (Onifade & Bridges, 2018) and (Lee & Bolt, 2016). Success stories are shared by (Ritchie & Jordan, 2013) and (Cramer & Boyd, 2010). Sister library narratives for specific types of library exist as: *academic* (Riehman-Murphy, Holloway, & Mattson, 2022), and *public* (Dubois & Downing, 2013). However, even with this helpful reading, establishing a sister library arrangement across borders is not something done overnight. It requires a thoughtful plan of expectations, as well as dedicated planning and implementation.

Expectations

A common misconception of sister libraries is that the libraries will have full access to each other's resources (e.g., access to subscription databases that the other library pays for). Due to contractual licensing agreements, this is rarely possible. Thus, libraries in developing areas, hoping to "tap into" subscription databases by becoming a sister library with a library in a developed area, will not likely be satisfied. Sister Library arrangements are not typically about resource-sharing. Rather, they are about idea-sharing, cultural exchange, professional collaboration (joint projects), and sometimes material exchanges (interlibrary loans). So, the first step in considering a sister library arrangement is to have a plan of expectations. What is your goal? What could you offer in the partnership? What is your incentive for wanting a sister library of a particular country? For example, a library in Italy may have no interests/reasons for connecting with a library in, say, Indonesia, so a sister library relationship there may be limited in relevance or benefits. However, due to the significant Chinese diaspora in Italy, that same Italian library may have a compelling incentive to pursue a sister library relationship with a library in China.

Planning & implementation

Sister library arrangements are planned out. Both libraries share their goals and expectations. For example, two sister academic libraries—one French, the other Vietnamese—may agree to share cataloguing advice and records for French and Vietnamese materials. Two sister public libraries—one Indian, the other Malaysian—may agree to cultural exchanges of books or materials for cultural/holiday displays (Indian: Diwali; Malaysian: Hari Raya). The most extensive resource for planning and implementing a sister library arrangement is the American Library Association's Sister Library website: <https://www.ala.org/rt/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrtsister>

library/sisterlibrary. At this site, it provides subpages for (a) becoming a sister library (a checklist of goals, ideas for cooperation); (b) a directory of sister library candidates around the world; (c) success stories of existing sister libraries; (d) resources for success, in various languages.

Mutual benefits

The overall benefit of sister library relationships is idea sharing. Libraries learn from each other. They borrow ideas from each other. They discover best practices (and likewise ineffective practices) from each other. A common question is how libraries in developing countries benefit from sister libraries in more developed countries and visa-versa? As noted above, in *Expectations*, developing libraries merely hunting for “giveaways” of resources/e-resources is *not* an appropriate motivation for sister library partnering. It is the knowledge sharing that is the prime benefit. For example, in a sister library relationship between Liverpool Public Library (New York, USA) and the Lantarang Kunda Starfish International Library, in Ghana, the two libraries “exchanges ideas and library techniques, and share their cultures with each other and their communities.” (Polly, 2011). Admittedly, sometimes resource sharing *can* occur, within legal or financial limits. For example, this author personally witnessed books shipped from one (more developed) Southeast Asian library to another (still developing) Southeast Asian library in 2019.

An example during Covid

An example of a sister library relationship during Covid-19 would be Penn State University Library (Pennsylvania, USA) and Monash University Library (Melbourne, Australia). When the pandemic interrupted normal library collaboration (in-person exchanges, in-library operations sharing, etc.) and librarians were quarantined at their homes, the two libraries initiated a creative event to keep social connections thriving: the “International Great Rare Books Bake Off.” This event invited home cooking of recipes or cultural foods—reflected in books or works from each library’s own collections—to then be shared from home kitchens over social media. But it was not merely a cooking event; it engaged library resources, involved both libraries’ staff, and showcased cultural exchanging. This collaboration was extremely successful—for both sides. A full overview of it is provided by Riehm-Murphy, Holloway, & Mattson, 2022.

1-ON-1 COLLABORATION

Formal Sister Library relationships are not necessary to collaborate with another library internationally. Individual libraries can, and do, connect with each other on a 1-on-1 basis, for mutual learning, sharing, and collaborating. The following points, below, highlight the process of collaborating with a partner library abroad. (For more details, see Mattson & Hickok (2018) “International library partnerships: From shoestring start-ups to institutional sponsorships”, and ALA (2022) “International Relations Roundtable, International Connections Committee: Documents”).

Identifying appropriate partnerships

Before even considering connecting with a foreign library, it is essential to determine your reasons. Connecting with a library abroad, simply to appear internationally-minded, is not an appropriate reason. When there is a relevant purpose, however, that is appropriate.

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Here are some examples: (a) a school librarian in Sweden connects with a school librarian in Thailand to collaborate on reading promotion activities, for a joint paper to present to IASL; (b) a public library in Arizona, USA, connects with a public library in Nepal, on Nepali literature collaboration (due to a large Nepali-speaking refugee population in Arizona); (c) an academic library in Vietnam connects with an academic library in Australia due to the frequent Study Abroad exchanges between their two universities—i.e., establishing joint Information Literacy training, so that students traveling in both directions can be better prepared for the libraries they encounter.

Types of collaboration

Collaborating with libraries in other countries can be done in many ways. Too often, there is a misperception that library collaboration must be a formal exchange visit (in-person travel to the library abroad); this is not accurate. There are many ways libraries in different countries can collaborate besides in-person visits: (a) *Email*. Although email is nothing new or fancy, it remains a valuable means of sharing and partnering. It is especially effective when synchronous (simultaneous) communication is difficult, due to time differences. Example: A school librarian in India sharing shelving arrangement ideas with a school librarian in the UK. (b) *Social Media*. Facebook, Twitter, Tik-Tok, Instagram, Snapchat, and more, all provide instant and photo communication. Example: an academic library in Brazil sharing Japanese written works with cataloguers of an academic library in Japan, for assistance, over Facebook. (c) *Videoconferencing*. Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, Hangouts, and other video applications are effective for collaboration. Example: a public library in Sri Lanka shares a real-time walk-through tour with a public library in New Zealand to compare ideas of space planning. (d) *Instant Messaging*. Programs such as Slack, or phone applications such as WeChat, WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, or Line, are all helpful for instant communication without long email threads. Example: an academic librarian in Singapore messaging a librarian in Bangladesh with questions about Bengali cultural works for a book display. When an opportunity does—at some point—come for an in-person exchange visit among collaborating libraries (in either direction), thoroughly vetting all details is essential (formal letters of invitation needed? Visa requirements?). Likewise essential is clarifying all expectations (travel costs responsible by the traveller? Guest accommodation available?) so that there are no misunderstandings.

An example during Covid

The National Central Library of Taiwan, like all libraries worldwide, was abruptly disrupted by the pandemic in 2020. In-person access closed, employees were confined at home, and many services were halted. However, for 2021, the library made a commitment to utilize its friendships and relationships with libraries and librarians abroad, by launching an “International Workshop for Professional Librarians.” This was a series of presentations,

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from librarians in England, the US, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Germany, and Greece, to share experiences over Zoom meetings. The event was extremely successful, with satisfaction surveys yielding 90% outstanding or very satisfied. A full description of this effort is provided by Hung & Hsu, 2021.

CROSS-CULTURAL OUTREACH EFFORTS

A final opportunity for international library cooperation is cross-cultural outreach efforts. This involves communicating with libraries abroad for input on the culture, information-seeking behaviour, reading interests, needs, and so on, of a target culture or nationality that may be visiting your library. Admittedly, not all libraries experience international or different-culture visitors. For example, a government public school library in China may likely only serve Chinese students. A public library in a rural province of the Philippines may likely only serve Philippine citizens of that local culture. A public university in Mongolia may likely only serve Mongolian students.

However, in capital and large metropolitan cities, international visitors are more common. Examples: Bangkok, Kathmandu, Dubai, New Delhi. In multicultural countries, or close-border countries, visitors of different cultures—to public libraries—are more common. Examples: Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, New York, London, Hong Kong. And for major universities, the number of international students can be significant—all using the library. Examples: Hong Kong University (China), Oxford University (UK), National University of Singapore (Singapore), Monash University (Australia).

The increasing numbers of East and Southeast Asians visiting libraries of *other* East and Southeast countries was presented by Hickok (2018): “Asian libraries serving users from other Asian countries: Get ready, it’s increasing!” In these published proceedings, travel visitor data was presented (of E/SE Asians visiting other E/SE Asian countries); multicultural demographics were shared (E/SE Asian cultures in other E/SE Asian countries); and international students statistics were shown (E/SE Asian students studying abroad in other E/SE Asian countries). The conclusion? Many libraries have *significant* international or cross-cultural traffic, and therefore the opportunity for outreach. For example, Chinese tourists in Thailand, Indonesian immigrants in Malaysia, Philippine workers in Taiwan, Myanmar students in Thailand, and on & on.

The opportunity for library outreach to international visitors or different-culture visitors is worldwide. For example, Mexican-heritage readers using US public libraries (border-states: California, Texas). Syrian immigrant children using Turkish school libraries. International students using South African universities (from neighbouring African countries). Various types of outreach efforts can be made. Examples include: (a) *bilingual or multilingual signage*. Example: Bangkok Public Library, bilingual signage in Thai and

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English (<https://www.prbangkok.com/en/news/detail/33/559>); (b) *multilingual collections*. Example: Taipei City Public Library, 9th floor multicultural literature collection with works in various languages for the expat or visitor community (https://english.tpml.gov.taipei/cp.aspx?n=5A5109C8B12FD291&ccms_cs=1); (c) *cultural displays*. Showcasing another culture in the library, such as a minority or neighbouring culture in, or near, a country, or the culture of international students in the country. Example: Monash University in Australia: Korean language and culture display (<https://guides.lib.monash.edu/korean/events> ; click the “Display” tab).

CONCLUSION

While international library cooperation certainly existed prior to Covid-19, the global cooperation seen during the pandemic served as an inspiration for resuming or launching library connections across borders. The four areas of international library cooperation discussed in this article—international associations/conferences, sister libraries, 1-on-1 collaboration, and cross cultural outreach efforts—are the most known, and conducted, forms of cooperation. But they are certainly not all. New forms of international library cooperation are arising. For example, special interest blogs or listserves—which cross borders—like the “School Librarian in Action” blog (<https://lovealibrarian.blogspot.com/>): it originates from the Philippines since 2005, but is read by school librarians outside the Philippines too. The library world is increasingly interconnected. E-resources and Library management systems which were primarily only in highly developed libraries in past decades, can now be found more commonly, worldwide. Telecommunication advances now allow us connect with each other instantly, across the globe. And common themes for libraries everywhere—literacy, information literacy, collection development, preservation, and more—give us incentive for collaboration. As “Best Practices” in the library world are implemented, the interest in sharing, borrowing, and emulating them increase too. Thus all the more need for international cooperation.

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