

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

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Abstract :

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Regional Office for Asia and Oceania and the National Library Board, Singapore jointly organized the inaugural Leaders' Conversations in 2020. The first series of the Leaders' Conversations focused on the future of the libraries in the Post-COVID-19 world and was held with the leaders of the various libraries. This report features enlightening insights from the library leaders from the national libraries, which are very much crucial for the operations of national libraries in today's uncertain environment.

Keywords : National libraries, COVID-19, Lockdowns, Library transformation, IFLA Regional Office for Asia and Oceania, National Library Board, Singapore.



The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Regional Office for Asia and Oceania and the National Library Board, Singapore jointly organised the inaugural Leaders' Conversations in 2020. Since then, the Leaders' Conversations has

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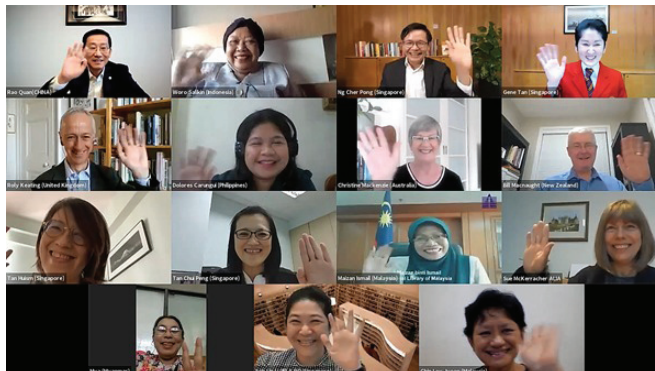
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been a digital platform for leaders in the region and beyond to share their insights on major developments in the library world. This initiative received great support from IFLA and is aligned to the IFLA Global Vision.

The first series of the Leaders' Conversations focused on the future of the libraries in the Post-COVID-19 world, and was held with the leaders of the National Libraries. Although we are now living in an endemic world, the leaders' insights are very much crucial for the operations of libraries in today's uncertain environment.

Ms Christine Mackenzie, then President of IFLA, 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 was rethinking about 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 believed that libraries need to think strategically about partnerships and work together with other library institutions and 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.

Mr. Rao Quan, then Director of the National Library of China (NLC) 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. While

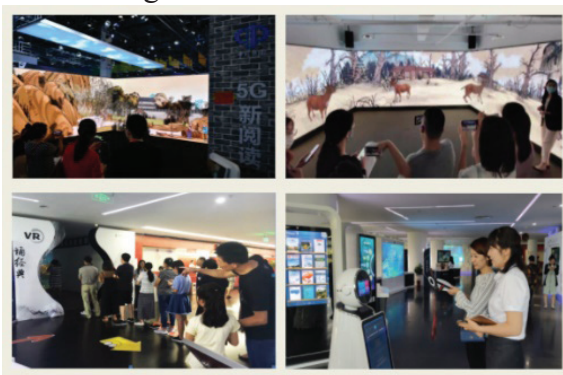
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NLC was closed to the public for a period of time, it continued to carry out its work on information collection and special research on disease prevention and control. NLC collected and preserved literature on COVID-19. It worked with libraries across the country to build a repository of the efforts in China's fight against the pandemic.

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, staffs 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.

While the pandemic posed a severe challenge, Mr Rao Quan opined that it served as an opportunity for the local libraries 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.



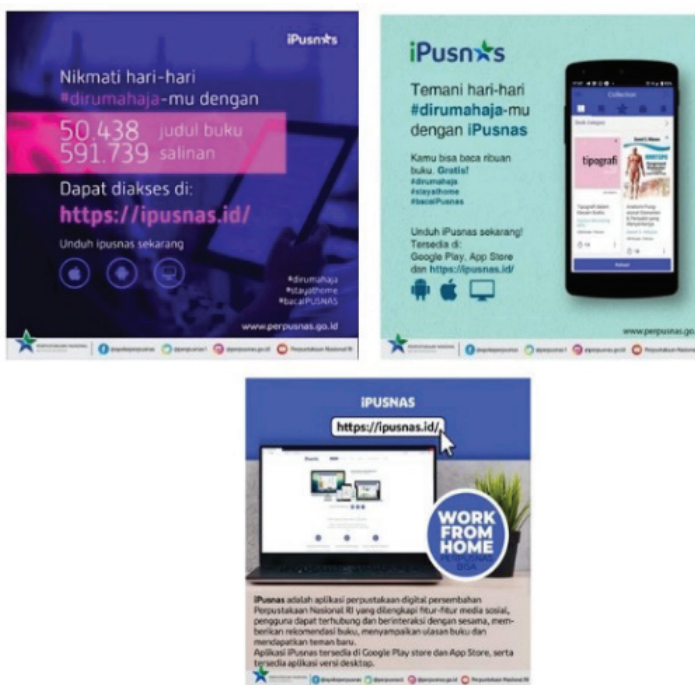
- c. Improve the value of libraries by improving public information literacy and enhancing public governance capabilities. Since the outbreak, the public had fallen victim to misinformation, bringing pressure to social governance and stressing the libraries even more.

To deal with the challenges, Mr Rao Quan proposed some aspects that libraries can focus on. First, 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. Second, 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

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library network and smart transformation of library spaces, resources and services to meet public demand for timely reading of materials at home.

Third, 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 was in the process of formulating the development plan for 2021 to 2025.



Ibu Woro Titi Haryanti Salikin, Prime Secretary from the National Library of Indonesia (NLI), presented the efforts of NLI in providing library services during this period. She said that the pandemic brought opportunities to libraries because library services were 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 was curated by librarians. NLI also provided access to e-resources, including e-journals and digital manuscripts), and the One search 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

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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.

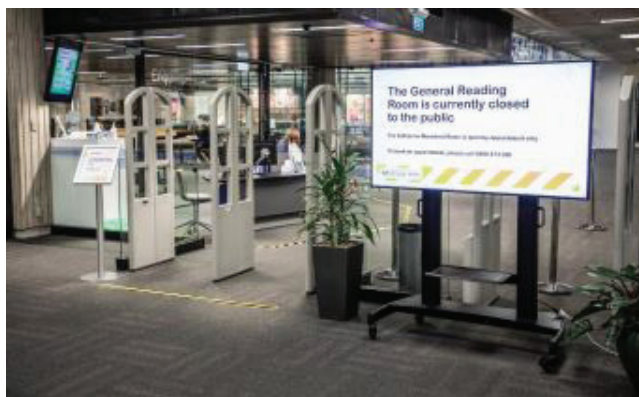
Although the pandemic was a challenge to the National Library of Malaysia (NLM)'s operations, Mdm Maizan binti Ismail, then Director of NLM, shared that they adapted and adopted new technologies in delivering libraries services to meet its users' needs. She highlighted NLM's digital platform, u-Pustaka (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 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.

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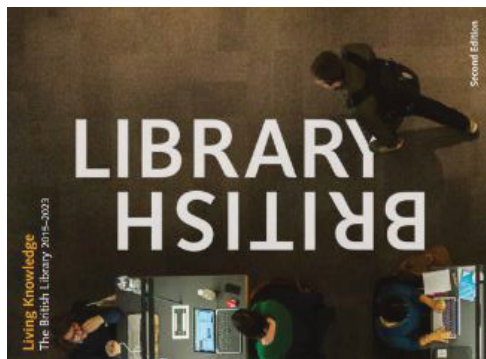
- b. Allow libraries to show their capabilities. The pandemic had allowed NLM to show its capabilities and value to stakeholders, thereby making it critical to allocate budget to the library to strengthen its ICT infrastructure and digital content.



- 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.

Mr Bill Macnaught, then Director of the National Library of New Zealand (NLNZ), highlighted that during the lockdown in 2020, 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 nation-wide 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.



Ms Dolores Carungui, Chief Librarian from the National Library of the Philippines (NLP), shared that 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 during the lockdown. 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. In view of the challenges, NLP will invest in e-resources, equipment and IT training for staff.

Mr Roly Keating, Chief Executive Officer from the British Library (BL), outlined the experiences of BL during the pandemic and its long-term strategies in his presentation.

In response to the pandemic, BL published a new chapter in its guiding strategy document, *Living Knowledge*. This document focused 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 long run, 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.

The Conversation ended with Mr Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive Officer of the National Library Board, Singapore (NLB) sharing about the 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.

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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. Once the libraries returned to normal operating hours, users were encouraged to secure slots online before entering the libraries. 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.

Mr Ng, CEO of the National Library Board, Singapore then thanked the participants for their time and support in making this session a success and sought their continued support for the subsequent conversations.