STRENGTHENING REGIONAL LIBRARY
COOPERATION NOW AND FOR THE FUTURE

by

MARIAM ABDUL KADIR**

ABSTRACT


INTRODUCTION

When I was given the choice of a topic for my paper, I decided to speak on cooperation in the region, namely South East Asia, even though this is a theme which has long been on the programme of all library conferences. The ALIA 2nd Biennial Conference itself has four sessions on various aspects of library cooperation. But I took the risk of presenting another paper on this topic because I strongly believe that the future path for libraries is through cooperation, be it at national level, regional level or global.

There are already countless papers presented at CONSAL Conferences and the Persatuan Perpustakaan Malaysia/Library Association of Singapore Joint Conferences which discussed in detail various cooperative library projects in Malaysia, Singapore and other South East Asian countries which can be referred to. What I will attempt to do is to assess the current situation of library groupings in the region, such as CONSAL and CDNLAO and also cooperative projects between libraries of ASEAN countries. Specific references to some cooperative projects in Malaysia will be made.

The need for libraries in Australia, namely the National Library of Australia for a more positive cooperative effort with South East Asian libraries will be looked at.

PRESENT CONSTRAINTS ON LIBRARY COOPERATION

Examples of successful cooperation between libraries in South East Asia today are somewhat few. The failure or problems with a number of such cooperative projects is that they seem to be good and viable during the planning stages but at the end of the day they become vulnerable to national self-interest and to the constraints of annual budgets. When resources are declining, there is understandably renewed interest in cooperation since cooperation is a possible way out to save money, but then neither does it produce wealth. Cooperation itself is expensive and when it fails to succeed, it can be a waste of resources. This can be disastrous to participating libraries where resources available are declining. We cannot afford therefore to embark on large-scale schemes for cooperation unless it bring benefits that can directly offset against costs. What is needed now is for us to take a look at existing regional and bilateral cooperative schemes.
with a view towards its priorities for expenditure. More often than not for countries in South East Asia, libraries are amongst the first to face budget cuts. Economic pressures will not disappear. Many libraries over the next ten to twenty years will be reviewing with increasing urgency those areas of cooperative activity that they believe they can no longer afford.

Earlier in the week, at the Panel session on "Cooperation: what it means" - some very interesting points were made which to me are relevant and worth repeating here.

1. That the strong motivating force behind the concept of sharing is to satisfy some self interest and the upgrading in level of service;
2. That there is a definite shift from cooperation between libraries to collaboration;
3. That New World Cooperation must offer clear results if it is to succeed and therefore directions need to be developed;
4. That a restructuring of some of the existing cooperation projects is clearly needed in the face of changing economic developments and in the growth of new technology;
5. That for national and regional purpose of cooperation, we will have to present more effectively to our respective governments the benefits of cooperation in order to secure the necessary funding, not only in the beginning but throughout the next decade.

Strengthening regional cooperation must clearly then take place within the context of the real world of costs and benefits. Weaknesses will have to be confronted together and financial constraints to be regarded as challenges that have to be met.

THE FUTURE

In foretelling the future, librarians are as good as astrologers who rely on the stars or on tea leaves. We would have to rely on others to pave the way for the future; the politician and economist who are in a better position to plan the future and even to execute it. What kind of future do we have to be prepared for?

The world has now entered into an era of transition with rapidly changing boundaries. We are also facing a shrinking world where no country can escape the consequences of the changes. With these changes also comes the challenges of action which confronts us at all levels. The centre of the world and the Pacific rim is moving towards South East Asia. Australia’s interest is also rapidly moving away from Europe to South East Asia.

There is also the “New World Order” as envisaged by President George Bush which unfortunately is confined to the political and military dimension of the world order, without giving enough attention to changing fundamentals in the “World Science and Technology Order” which will be more and more critical as countries move into the post-industrial information age. What we need is not a “New World Order” but a “Better World Order” where global and regional cooperation is an essential element. This should not be confined to political, military or economic cooperation only. Global and regional cooperation for a “Better World Order” must include information technology and information resources.

REGIONAL POLITICAL GROUPING: ASEAN

Politically, six countries of South East Asia, namely Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Brunei have opted for a regional grouping under the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) umbrella to facilitate problem solving between neighbours. ASEAN cooperation have proved effective in the political field, cultural and information, but not so successful in joint economic programmes. Library cooperation programmes implemented at governmental level under ASEAN-COCI (Asean Cooperation On Culture and Information) have been successful e.g. a joint library programme “Exchange of ASEAN Librarians” was implemented for three years in 1986 to 1988. Each country took turns to host a working seminar and library visit programme for six different librarians from each ASEAN country on topics such as public libraries, national libraries, academic libraries, special libraries, library training and library computerisation. A publication of the working papers from each seminar is now being undertaken by each host country. Both projects are fully financed by the ASEAN-COCI secretariat of each country.

To cooperate successfully, ASEAN member countries have learnt to complement each other than to compete. A committed ASEAN with common strategies for action will be stronger and more effective than different strategies implemented by each country. We have to accept the need to work together for the common good.
REGIONAL LIBRARY GROUPING: CONSAL

A non-governmental level regional library grouping has also been formed with the main aim of promoting regional cooperation. CONSAL - the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians, has been in existence since 1970 when it was formed during the First Conference of Southeast Asian Libraries in Singapore. It is an independent regional body and it functions under the provisions of a constitution. The objectives of CONSAL are mainly:

1. to establish and strengthen relations among librarians, libraries, library schools, library associations and related organisations in the region;

2. to promote cooperation in the fields of librarianship, library education, documentation and related activities in the region;

3. to cooperate with other regional and international organisations and institutions in the fields of librarianship, library education, documentation and related activities.

CONSAL produced four resolutions and it should be noted that the most important resolution is resolution two on education and training of librarians due to the urgent need for professionally trained professionals in 1970s. A review of CONSAL was made by Patricia Lim Pui Huen at CONSAL V in 1981 and again in 1987 at CONSAL VII an assessment of CONSAL was made by D.E.K. Wijasuriya. CONSAL has met without fail at least once every three years, each member country taking turn to host the meeting. The periodic conferences are invaluable and provide a venue for librarians in the region to meet. Thus, the objective of strengthening relation among librarians, library institutions and library associations in the region is achieved to some extent. In her review Pat Lim noted that one of the most successful cooperative projects of CONSAL are its publications. CONSAL conference proceedings are published by the host country and present records of library development of member countries. Cooperative efforts of CONSAL members have produced Masterlist of Microforms published in 1978 and Directory of Librarians in Southeast Asia in 1980. Such successful cooperative efforts of professional regional publications need to be continued and strengthened. Pat Lim also noted that CONSAL has played a supplementary role in "generating a climate conducive to cooperative activities" and has made a positive contribution to the implementation of such regional projects as NLDC-SEA Consortium and ISDS-SEA. However the resolution made at CONSAL I and later at all subsequent CONSAL meetings on library education and in-service training within the region and a programme of staff exchange between Southeast Asian libraries saw little initiative from member countries.

CONSAL in its present status is simply a forum for professional contact and exchange. A fundamental weakness of CONSAL is its present structure. At CONSAL V in 1981, Pat Lim had recommended that "it become an instrument for action to find regional solution to regional problems and to initiate and undertake cooperative programmes". D.E.K. Wijasuriya reported that CONSAL V in Kuala Lumpur considered the possibility of initiating joint activities in order to give greater effect to CONSAL's objective, but without a permanent secretariat and adequate funding, this was not possible then. The time for action to strengthen CONSAL must be done now if we are to meet the challenges of the future together. Aside from the meetings, there is a need for other programmes and activity to be developed. It is hoped that during CONSAL IX in April 1993 in Bangkok, discussions on this issue will be seriously considered. The compositions and functions of the Executive Board will have to be examined. Cooperative projects such as resource sharing and information exchange will have to be strengthened with a more cooperative spirit amongst the participating members.

For regional library cooperation programmes in South East Asia to be strengthened, certain fundamental snags will have to be resolved. There is greater need today for political stability in member countries which will lead to an atmosphere of regional cooperation and goodwill. The question of government financial support is another problem. At the present stage of uneven political and economic development amongst ASEAN countries, there is a need for a country with the more stable political structure and adequate funds to submerge national interests and lead the way. Language and cultural differences will have to be put aside, though this can be difficult and has been the cause for the slow takeoff of some CONSAL proposals. Proposals for a regional library school in CONSAL I and CONSAL II never got off the ground for obvious language and differences in levels of library training already in existence in each country, even though there is the advantage of it providing sound training facilities that would meet specific South East Asian needs.

CONSAL will also need to seriously take steps to implement its third objective: i.e. "to cooperate with other regional and international organisations and
institutions in the fields of librarianship, library education, documentation and related activities. There is a lot of scope for cooperation between ALIA and CONSAL, either as a group or with individual library associations. CONSAL conferences can provide an important forum for professional discussions between South East Asian and Australian librarians.

**NATIONAL LIBRARY COOPERATION AND ASSISTANCE**

National libraries have traditionally played a central role in library cooperation and training. At Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia (National Library of Malaysia) we recognise that, both in the functions defined in the National Library Act (Amended) 1987 and as a Federal government department, we are responsible for providing in-service training for both professionals and non-professionals not only in the country but also to other developing countries which the Malaysian government deems fit to receive technical assistance under the MTCP (Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme). Since the early 1980's Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia has carried out two levels of in-service training for this technical cooperation programme. which is a four week library visits and attachment programme for the middle management level and a six week theory and practical course for library assistants. Initially these programmes were for ASEAN countries and other Asian countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but this has now included the Pacific Islands of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Tonga, and African countries such as Uganda, Nigeria and Malawi. It is a governmental level cooperative programme and trainees accepted have to be endorsed by their respective government. Each year we receive 20 librarians i.e. 10 for each programme. Though it is a Malaysian Government assistance programme, the objective is for Malaysian government institutions such as Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia to share its technical and professional experience with others. Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia has to get the cooperation of other libraries in Malaysia for the successful implementation of the library attachment programme.

I feel that the National Library of Australia and some State Libraries in Australia are in a position to provide a similar form of cooperative venture to librarians from Southeast Asia with internship and library visits programme.

**REGIONAL NATIONAL LIBRARY COOPERATION**

**South East Asia:**

National Libraries within the South East Asian countries have the primary role of being the National Referral Centre of the country and also the main referral centre for its own publications. Problems of access to the indigenous publications of the region have resulted in the five national institutions forming the National Libraries and Documentation Centre - South East Asia (NLDC-SEA) Consortium in 1979 with the main objectives:

1. to provide access to all library materials excepting classified items, from countries of the Consortium;

2. to promote and coordinate the acquisition within each country of library materials of the region;

3. to promote the prompt recording of the national output of library materials in the national bibliography;

4. to create in each institution a register of publications translated from local languages into languages for broader distribution;

5. to initiate action to reduce barriers to the free flow of library materials within the region;

6. to provide regular monitoring of the operations of the Consortium in order to evaluate and improve access to library materials; and

7. to establish effective communication channels among the institutions.

While the objectives are encouraging and useful as a platform for regional cooperation in resource sharing, the difficulties faced by member institutions to meet requests for inter library loans and microform/photocopies of their national imprints and foreign publications have been a big stumbling block. Mrs Hedwig Anuar, in a survey of the services of the Consortium in 1981 noted that the volume of services are low due mainly to gaps in collection of national imprints, and unfortunately this is still the case. Document supply of foreign publications is even lower. IDRC provided financial support for the first three years, enabling the installation of telex, microfilm and photo copying equipment. Consortium Liaison Officers were appointed. A regional inter lending system also depends on a high degree of collaborative behaviour by its participating members.
and there is a great lack of such collaboration in NLDC-SEA consortium.

The Consortium Directors last met together in 1987 in Manila where a new format for the interchange of materials among ASEAN Libraries was planned. However, since no host Coordinator was appointed then and no further meetings of the Consortium were held, the NLDC-SEA Consortium seems to be in limbo waiting for a revival since 1989. The post of Consortium Liaison Officer at Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia was terminated and requests for Malaya and the Pacific: 

in information in the Director!'

linkup to Iran. 

Malaysia was

1

1

next time for another meeting of National Library Directors of ASEAN countries where the main item on the agenda will have to be the continuance of the Consortium for the benefit of library development in the region. The Consortium has to be strengthened by minimising the barriers to the free flow of information in the region, such as easier access to each other's database. Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia and Perpustakaan Nasional Indonesia is in a strong position to do this now since both have established a national bibliographic database using the same software, with the possibility of a direct linkup to each other's database. The usage of common languages of Malay and English will ensure the successful implementation of such a cooperative venture.

Asia and the Pacific:

National Libraries not only from the ASEAN countries but also the Pacific Islands are fortunate that two national libraries in Asia and the Pacific, namely the National Library of Australia and the National Diet Library have initiated and successfully implemented various cooperative projects. Both national libraries have an extensive gift and exchange programme and very much involved in document supply activities in the Asia-Pacific region. National Library of Australia's Regional Cooperation Programme (RCP), an aid programme which supports national libraries within the Asia Pacific region deserves greater support from outside agencies, so that assistance for enhancing library services can be extended to more countries in the region. Both the National Diet Library and the Australian National Library, being more technologically advanced, are in a position to provide assistance in computer networking projects. Both are IFLA Regional Preservation and Conservation (PAC) Centres. Their role as PAC Centres will have to be strengthened financially. They will also need to quickly establish preservation programmes in the Asia Pacific region. Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia has drawn up a policy for the conservation and preservation of its own collection and is now planning to formulate a National Policy for Preservation of Printed Library Materials to ensure that the present library collections throughout the country will be preserved for the future. Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia will need to cooperate and work closely with both PAC Regional Centres on this. There is a need for more workshops on preservation policies. Internship and attachment programmes for all levels of preservation programmes and experience in the region such as National Library of Australia, National Diet Library of Japan and National Library of Thailand will greatly help other countries in the region who are starting to implement it. Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia is also planning to upgrade its preservation facilities in the new building.

UNESCO has also initiated two networks in the Asia Pacific region which depends on the willingness of countries in the region to participate and cooperate in its projects and programmes. ASTINFO, the Regional Network for the Exchange of Information and Experience in Science and Technology in Asia and the Pacific was established in 1984 and operates within the broader General Information Programme of UNESCO. APINESS is a similar network, but operating in the area of social sciences. In Malaysia, as in Australia, the National Library has been designated the National Coordinating Centres for both ASTINFO and APINESS. ASTINFO has carried out a member of workshops on the use of its micro software, CDS-ISIS. ASTINFO's pilot document delivery project for the region is coordinated by National Library of Australia. APINESS, established later in 1986 is less developed and suffers to a certain extent from the lower profile of the social sciences compared to science and technology. So far there have been no major projects except for the annual meetings of the coordinating centres and a newsletter produced twice a year. ASTINFO and APINESS are ready mechanisms for regional cooperation, with the financial funding from UNESCO, deserves more support from participating countries. Successful implementation of ASTINFO and APINESS projects depends on the establishment and strength of national networks for both disciplines.

Another regional grouping of libraries is the Conference of Directors of National Libraries of Asia and Oceania (CDNLAO), a loosely formed group of about 23 national libraries in the region which has met four times since its first meeting in 1979 in Canberra. The next CDNLAO will be in Kuala Lumpur on 23 - 26 November, 1992. The convening of CDNLAO while helping to further strengthen inter library cooperation among national libraries in the region, is only of significance if it can be held on a more regular basis. Previous CDNLAO meetings have tended to be only a forum for presentation of country reports and reviews of various country projects. The last meeting in Beijing in 1989 have produced a
number of papers on cooperation and recommendations for action. However, as with CONSAL, there is no mechanism for action and most of the recommendations tend to be mere statements of fact. At the 5th CDNLAO meeting in Kuala Lumpur, there will be a session for a review of CDNLAO where recommendations for its future development will be tabled. CDNLAO needs a change in its set-up so that it will be in a stronger position to act on cooperative projects that will bring government and UNESCO support.

CONCLUSION

As we move across the threshold of the twenty first century, I believe that it is time for us to chart new directions. What we have now must not be taken for granted. Regional cooperation abhors a standstill. Momentum has to be sustained and it can only be sustained by new initiatives. It is time to strengthen not just our political and economic bonds, but all the bonds that will strengthen our community. Greater library cooperation is essential if we want to establish an informed society in the region. Every regional cooperative programmes will need a clear mission statement on what it needs to achieve in the year 2000 and beyond and to review this mission periodically. We will have to harness our limited energy and resources to the essential programmes only. There need to be a more positive cooperative effort in areas of bibliographic control and interchange of bibliographic data, conservation and preservation, staff training and exchange and resource sharing. But there must be full recognition of the differences in the level of development of member country governments. Where necessary, flexibility with regards to participation and time phasing must be provided. Most important, regional cooperation needs the commitment of each participating member to ensure that it will and must succeed.

REFERENCES


