The IFLA “Building Strong Library Associations” Program in Myanmar: its implementation and outcomes for the Myanmar Library Association

Dr Michael Robinson
IFLA BSLA Program Core Trainer
Myanmar Library Association BSLA Program

Introduction

This paper discusses the implementation of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) “Building Strong Library Associations” (BSLA) program with the Myanmar Library Association between 2013 and 2015. Perspectives are offered on the implementation of the program in Myanmar, the outcomes to date for the Myanmar Library Association, and the future directions the Association is taking in seeking to engage with libraries, librarians and other stakeholders in Myanmar, as well as with other library associations in the region.

IFLA BSLA Program

The IFLA “Building Strong Library Associations” is a comprehensive program offering a strategic and coordinated approach to the capacity building and sustainability of library associations. IFLA’s vision for this program is to benefit library associations, and the library and information profession and their communities in general by building strong, sustainable library associations. The program will help library associations and their members increase their potential to improve services for library users, provide equitable access to information, and develop the library and information profession.

The BSLA program was devised in 2009, and consists of a series of training packages, learning materials and activities that can be customized to accommodate different cultural, political, technological, social and other conditions. The program is delivered by the IFLA Action for Development through Libraries (ALP) program. The core modules are;

- **Library Associations in Society**: – providing an overview of the role and function of library associations.
- **Building Your Library Association**: - containing modules which cover some of the essentials of library association planning and organization.
- **Sustaining Your Library Association**: - focusing on the development of association finances, programs and membership
- **Developing Strategic Relationships**: - addressing the key issues of building partnerships, fundraising and communications strategies.
- **Libraries on the Agenda**: - focusing on the development and implementation of advocacy programs
- **Library Statistics for Advocacy and Copyright for Library Associations**: two specialist modules designed to complement the main programs above.
Since 2010, a number of BSLA country projects have been established from proposals put forward by library associations from each of the IFLA regional sections in Africa, Asia and Oceania, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Each country project is conducted for at least two years by an IFLA core trainer in partnership with a country's national or regional library association, to work through a series of customized training and other activities. In-country workshops are usually scheduled several months apart, to give the local library association the opportunity to consider, discuss and where appropriate implement the outcomes of the workshop before new concepts and material are introduced. Between 2010 and 2012, BSLA programs have been undertaken with library associations in countries as diverse as Peru, Lebanon, Cameroon, Botswana and Nepal. (IFLA, 2012)

The BSLA Project in Myanmar

An initial visit to Myanmar was undertaken by IFLA representatives between the 21st and 27th June 2013, to conduct a needs assessment and develop a country plan with the Executive Committee of the Myanmar Library Association. Meetings were held with the MLA in addition to visits and meetings at public, community and academic libraries (including the Universities Central Library and Yangon University Library), the Yangon University Department of Library and Information Science, the British Council, the United States Information Centre, the Myanmar Libraries Foundation, Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation and others. The intention of these visits was to develop an understanding of the current situation of libraries and librarianship in Myanmar, and to identify potential stakeholders and partners in the proposed BSLA project. In the course of these meetings, Executive Committee members of the Myanmar Library Association articulated their vision for the future role of the Association, as follows;

- To lead the libraries and library professionals of the country
- To be an educational centre for library and information services
- To be a centre for library standards, policies, rules and regulations
- To co-operate with foreign associations to develop the role of the association
- To attract users to public libraries;
- To be soundly governed and sustainable into the future
- To assist government to understand the role of libraries (and the library association) in civil society

These statements reflect the current situation not only of the Myanmar Library Association but of libraries in Myanmar generally. Librarians in Myanmar have emerged recently from a long period of professional isolation, and need to address a multiplicity of development issues. Funding for libraries is poor, and in general libraries at all levels lack resources, infrastructure and adequate professional expertise to develop services for their communities. Access to foreign expertise and shared resources has likewise been limited until recently, and the level of professional training of most librarians is in general acknowledged to be insufficient. The Myanmar Library Association hitherto has been constrained in its scope and role in supporting libraries and librarians, and - being previously restricted to government librarians only - has had difficulties in establishing itself as a representative voice for the profession. In the absence of a strong national library association, the task of driving a library development agenda has by default largely fallen to a handful of widely known and respected older leaders of the profession.
However, significant opportunities have emerged with changes in Myanmar in recent years, and the MLA is well positioned to capitalize on these. There is currently substantial interest in supporting libraries in Myanmar from development agencies, funders and similar organizations, and credible partners are being sought out to implement and co-ordinate programs, for example in infrastructure development and professional and para-professional training. There is also a clear need to support the professional development of a new generation of librarians and leaders in the country, and to provide a channel for professional development opportunities with library associations and other partners overseas. A role is also emerging for the Myanmar Library Association to advocate on behalf of the profession to both government and the public in general. In all respects, the potential is present for the Association to act as a credible force for libraries, supporting infrastructure development, training and policy formulation across the country.

**Scope of the MLA BSLA Program**

Set against this background, and based on discussions with the MLA and other stakeholders, the following broad goals were drafted for the BSLA Program in Myanmar;

- **Role**: to develop a better understanding amongst MLA members and other librarians of the role of library associations in society.
- **Governance**: to develop committees and branches across the country to support the association, as demand for training and member services grows.
- **Partnerships**: to investigate options for more formal partnerships with other library associations and library development organizations, and to develop strategies for initiating and managing proposals for support.
- **Collaboration and coordination**: to strengthen the MLA’s role as a leader of the library profession in the country, and to play a coordinating role where appropriate in library development projects.
- **Library development**: To participate in - and where relevant to lead - campaigns for projects and policies to support the development of Myanmar libraries, such as library legislation, support for library resources, and the role of libraries in Myanmar society.

A proposed program was put forward for four workshops, to be conducted by an IFLA Core Trainer with the MLA in a project running over approximately three years, from August 2013 through until August 2016. The proposed workshops are;

- Workshop 2: Developing Strategic Relationships: Partnerships, Fundraising and Communications – June, 2014
- Workshop 4: Sustaining your Library Association, Review Meeting and Partnerships Event - October 2015

In addition, the program includes participation in a number of other events intended to encourage MLA engagement with other library associations in the region. To date, the proposed additional activities are;
- Support for MLA member attendance at the IFLA WLIC in 2013, 2014 and 2015
- Participation in the IFLA BSLA “Asia and Oceania Regional Convening” in Jakarta, Indonesia, February 2014 (see below).
- Proposal for MLA to convene a BSLA workshop at CONSAL 2016
- MLA participation in a proposed IFLA BSLA Global Convening in 2016.

IFLA also provides general advice, guidelines and standards, and opportunities for networking with other associations and experts. The MLA is tasked with implementing action plans between workshops to ensure that the project retains its momentum overall.

**Progress of BSLA Workshops**

At the time of writing, two of the proposed four workshops have been conducted, with the third workshop scheduled for the 12th to 14th January 2015.

**Workshop 1: Library Associations in Society, Building Your Library Association - Yangon, 13th to 15th January 2014**

The first workshop of the IFLA BSLA program in Myanmar was held with members of the Myanmar Library Association in Yangon from 13th to 15th January 2014. The workshop was hosted by the British Council, and was attended by 26 people, mostly drawn from the Executive Committee of the MLA, as well as regional representatives from other parts of Myanmar and a number of advisors to the Association. In addition to Dr Michael Robinson as the IFLA core trainer, the workshop was attended by Dr Prachark Wattananusit, Vice President of the Thai Library Association, and Ms Jennefer Nicholson, Secretary-General of IFLA, both of whom gave presentations on the first day of the workshop.

The key themes of Workshop 1 – as discussed and agreed with the MLA EC at the IFLA scoping visit in June 2013 - followed the BSLA modules “Library Associations in Society”, “Library Associations in Context” and “Building Your Library Association”. However, much of this content was substantially modified to suit the needs of the MLA, and included many practical activities to encourage contributions from all participants.

Day 1 of the workshop focused on the key issues previously identified by the MLA, and more broadly on the role of library associations in society. It included examples from Thailand and Hong Kong on the aims and activities of library associations, and a presentation by the IFLA Secretary-General on IFLA’s role and function. Day 2 concentrated exclusively on the situation and context of the MLA, and on planning and organizing the objectives and activities of the Association. The participants were engaged in conducting a SWOT analysis of the current situation of the MLA, and in beginning to map out a strategic plan of programs and activities for the coming year. Day 3 continued the previous day’s program and included presentations on association structure and governance, the role of committees, and analysis of membership, member categories and the concept of member benefit. The workshop concluded with a summary of the key content, learning outcomes and an action plan for tasks to be completed prior to the second workshop.

**Workshop 2: Developing Strategic Relationships: Partnerships, Fundraising and Communications - Mawlamyaing, 30th June to 2nd July 2014**
The second workshop of the BSLA program was held in Mawlamyaing, Mon State, between Monday 30th June and Wednesday 2nd July 2014. This workshop commenced with a formal opening ceremony attended by the Minister for Social Affairs for Mon State, Dr Hla U, and a number of regional Ministers and officials. The Minister showed great interest in the program and undertook to follow up with the MLA on training for librarians for Mon State. The opening ceremony was also attended by regional media, and interviews were recorded for TV news bulletins. The workshop was attended by 25 people, and while the majority of the attendees were from the MLA Executive Committee and had previously attended Workshop 1, several were newcomers who were MLA members from the Mon and Kayin States, adding a new perspective to the workshop discussions.

The key theme of Workshop 2 was “Partnerships, Fundraising and Communications”, and over a three day period a number of the presentations were used from the BSLA training modules on Partnerships and Fundraising. These focused on the need for the MLA to plan and organize their partnership and fundraising programs according to the Association’s needs and priorities, as previously identified in their strategic plan. This will help the MLA to target potential partners and funders in a more structured way. Day 3 of this workshop concentrated on a similar need to develop a cohesive communications plan, targeting the “internal” audience of existing and prospective members, and the “external” audience of potential partners, funders and other stakeholders.

The mode of delivery in this workshop was the same as for Workshop 1, with presentations followed by small group discussions, reports and a further whole group discussion. The workshop concluded with a summary of the key content, learning outcomes and an action plan for tasks to be completed prior to the third workshop.

Future MLA Workshops


A third workshop is scheduled for January 2015 and will undertake three principle activities. Firstly, following MLA elections in November, a number of Executive Committee members have stood down or changed roles, and new members have been elected to the positions of President and Vice-President in particular. Consequently, the work undertaken to date will be reviewed in this third workshop to bring the Executive Committee up to date and to review key targets in the MLA Strategic Plan. The core of the workshop, however, will be focused on library association advocacy plans and will seek to identify and develop the focus of MLA advocacy campaigns in the short to medium term future. This will make use of the corpus of IFLA advocacy policy materials and programs. Thirdly, the workshop will be an opportunity to begin the planning for a proposed meeting with regional library associations, funding and development agencies and other library development bodies in Myanmar, to coincide with the fourth workshop to take place in October 2015.

Workshop 4: Sustaining your Library Association, Review Meeting and Partnerships Event - October 2015

The focus of the fourth and final workshop will be to review and consolidate the outcomes of the BSLA program overall, culminating in a regional meeting of library associations, development agencies and other stakeholders, to be hosted by the MLA.
Project Outcomes and Future Objectives

The BLSA Program in Myanmar is now at the half-way point, and a number of key areas in library association development have been addressed in the first two workshops. This has given rise to several actions and outcomes, which have been taken up at the conclusion of each workshop by the MLA Executive Committee and sub-committees through their regular meeting and work programs.

Looking at the key items to emerge so far from the workshops, the MLA initially engaged in group discussion sessions which provided valuable background analysis of their current situation. The most important of these was to undertake a SWOT analysis of the Association’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as a preparatory activity to formulating a long term strategic plan and immediate operational plan. The MLA has worked on an operational plan to identify, organize and assign responsibility for key initiatives for the coming two years. A template was provided for a simple presentation of objectives, activities and accountability, and this is being used as a guide for the completion of the MLA operational plan for 2014-2015 by the Executive Committee.

A review of typical governance mechanisms – such as association charters, by-laws and regulations – has provided the MLA participants with an opportunity to “checklist” their own Association governance. In particular, the MLA has had the opportunity to consider whether its committee structure is appropriate to the aim to be more inclusive of regional membership, and an additional sub-committee for co-ordinating activities with the regions is planned. The review also highlighted, however, that under the existing committee structure a significant portion of the Association’s administration devolves to the General Secretary. Consequently, formal Terms of Reference need to drafted for each sub-committee, and that reporting mechanisms are put in place to ensure that the chairs of sub-committees are responsible and accountable for the work of their sub-committees.

Part of the program so far has focused on MLA membership, including both current categories of membership as well as potential new categories. This has been approached from the point of view of member benefit, to help to identify and develop the compelling reasons that different types of member may join the MLA and retain their membership. The MLA wishes to revise its membership categories and develop services for new member categories as part of its operational planning, in particular the prospect of a student membership category, targeting and supporting the next generation of librarians to enter the workforce.

The MLA has also worked towards developing a partnership plan, with a view in particular towards the event aimed at building partnerships coinciding with the final BSLA workshop. Work is being done on strengthening strategic thinking about the Association’s aims for partnerships so that detailed plans are made for the partnership meeting. A list of potential partners / invitees has been compiled.

A funding needs analysis has been drafted by the MLA to prioritize the most pressing needs for support by the Associations, and both known and potential funders which might be approached in future have been mapped out. An important feature to emerge in the MLA approach to fundraising was the idea of raising funds not through donors but by managing business activities. The Association has expressed a strong interest in meeting with other Library Associations or similar organizations in a similar situation to themselves, who has successfully developed fund-raising activities of this sort.
The MLA has drafted a communications plan based on target audiences and types of information to be conveyed, and in addition to existing communication activities such as regular print newsletters are focusing on the development of online newsletters, a website and a social media presence.

**Future Directions of the IFLA BSLA**

The BSLA country program in Myanmar is the latest to be undertaken by IFLA in the format of long-term development in partnership with the national library association. Following a review in 2013, IFLA has also expanded the BSLA program to adopt a regional approach to library association development, bringing together associations in joint regional convenings which have taken place so far in Africa, Asia-Oceania and Latin America. The aim of the regional convenings is to introduce a number of the key concepts from the BSLA workshop modules in a condensed mode over a three day workshop, and in the process to offer participant associations the opportunity to identify needs and commence the formulation of their own development proposals. These draft proposals – usually for a single discrete activity such as an in-country workshop – are then taken back by association representatives to their home countries for endorsement by their associations and formal submission for funding to the IFLA Action for Development through Libraries (ALP) program.

The regional convening for Asia-Oceania was held in Jakarta, Indonesia in March 2014, and was hosted by the National Library of Indonesia. The convening brought together over 35 representatives from 13 library associations from South East Asia and the Pacific Islands, including the Myanmar Library Association. This provided opportunities for the library associations to work together, share ideas and experience, and to begin to explore opportunities for collaboration in the future. While to date a formal project proposal has not emerged from the MLA, the regional convening has provided a strong foundation for the Association to pursue its objective of developing stronger regional partnerships.

**Conclusion**

Set in the context of a society in transition, the Myanmar Library Association faces considerable challenges not only in supporting the development of libraries and librarianship across the country, but also of establishing and positioning itself to act as a representative voice of the profession nationally and internationally. The aim of the BSLA program is to introduce the key concepts of library association management to support the MLA and assist their adjustment to a rapidly changing professional environment. While the program is not yet completed, the outcomes to date indicate the willingness on the part of the MLA Executive Committee to transform itself in order to take up a leadership role in the development of the profession in the coming years.

**References**

Author Biography

Dr Michael Robinson has been associated with the IFLA Building Strong Library Associations program since its inception in 2009. He was a member of the initial project development group, and has subsequently become an IFLA Core Trainer for the program, conducting full BSLA programs in Nepal and Myanmar, in addition to being the trainer for the IFLA ALP leadership program with the Vietnamese Library Association in 2012 and a co-trainer for the BSLA Asia & Oceania Regional Convening in 2014. Professionally, Dr Robinson has been involved in libraries and library development in Asia for fourteen years. He was the Director of Library and Learning Resource Centre Projects for RMIT University Vietnam from 2002, undertaking major library building projects for four Vietnamese universities, in addition to projects such as the authorized Vietnamese translation of the Dewey Decimal Classification (14th Abridged Edition) and programs to support the re-establishment of the Vietnamese Library Association. He was also the Director of the Hong Kong Institute of Education Libraries between 2005 and 2012, and was the President of the Hong Kong Library Association from 2008 to 2009. He is now the Chief Executive Officer of CAVAL, the Australian library consortium, and is based in Melbourne.

Contact Details

Dr Michael Robinson  
Chief Executive Officer,  
CAVAL  
4 Park Drive,  
Bundoora  
Victoria 3083  
Australia  
{michael.robinson@caval.edu.au}  
+61 3 94505501