Myanmar Libraries after the 'Opening Up'

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses the recent development of libraries in Myanmar and efforts to build the sector's capacity leading up to and after the first democratic elections held in the country in nearly 50 years, at the end of 2015. Cyclone Nargis in 2008 is viewed as a 'framing event' (Birkland, 1998) that led to national legal and policy reforms, an increase in national and international projects to support development of Myanmar libraries, and the strengthening of local actors including the Myanmar Library Association to coordinate and lead development activities. Although in need of modernisation, networking, and professional skills, the existence of a widespread number of all library types across the country provides an important foundation for further development. The current status and readiness of libraries is explored in the broader context of the rapid leap from limited to more widely available access to information and technology. The article finds that there is great potential for libraries in Myanmar to support the continued transition to democracy as evidenced by the role of libraries and access to information in other countries that have transitioned. Remaining challenges include the potential of backsliding on national reforms, and the need for significant investments in infrastructure and skills. Libraries must be transformed to meet the changing needs of information users in a young democracy.

Keywords: Myanmar, library associations, capacity building, access to information, policy, democracy

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1. METHODOLOGY

Research for this article was obtained through needs assessment visits to Myanmar in 2013 and 2016 that included library visits and interviews, and a review of the literature. As limited recent scholarly sources about libraries in Myanmar are available, this paper is primarily based on these interviews, observation, and news media, together with literature on the role of libraries in democratisation.

Needs assessment visits included interviews with representatives from the Myanmar Library Association and their key stakeholders, and meetings with the association to establish project objectives, roles, and indicators to measure progress. Interviews were conducted with representatives from a range of library types, organisations that support libraries including government, and individuals. At the end of the project, interviews were undertaken with many of the same stakeholders to understand what had changed, and new stakeholders where relevant. The interviews were conducted primarily for the basis of the project and therefore may not have fully captured all issues relating to libraries and librarians in Myanmar. The author acknowledges a bias towards urban participants in interviews as most interviews were conducted in Yangon, a major city in Myanmar. Several interviewees had worked in or had strong links to other regions of the country and could speak to the situation beyond Yangon; however, it is acknowledged that this is not a substitute for conducting additional regional interviews.

The needs assessment visits took place as part of a larger IFLA project with the Myanmar Library Association (MLA) under the auspices of the Building Strong Library Associations programme (IFLA & Bradley, 2012). The author of this article was the programme manager during the entirety of the project. Activities undertaken as part of this project between 2013 and 2016 included needs assessment and project review visits, training, stakeholder meetings, mentoring, and peer learning activities with representatives from several library associations (IFLA, 2016; Robinson, 2015).

The overall project design utilised IFLA's impact assessment framework which acknowledges that interventions contribute to a change, but change cannot be directly attributed to any one specific intervention whether positive or negative (IFLA, 2010). This article therefore asserts that the changes that took place in the library sector after 2013 must be viewed within and are inseparable from the broader political, economic, social, technological, and legal changes within the country during that time, and other interventions in the library sector.

Sample interview questions based on IFLA's impact assessment framework (IFLA, 2010) are included in Appendix B. The questions are tailored to the situation of each country and its libraries. As the framework is not prescriptive and some interviews were conducted with a Burmese interpreter, interview questions varied from interview to interview. Not all questions were asked of all interviewees as questions varied depending on the interviewee's role. Interviews generally lasted one hour, or two hours for interviews with groups of participants. Interviews at library sites also included visits to the library at the conclusion of the interview. The author was the lead interviewer, with the trainer an active participant in interviews. They were accompanied at most interviews by at least two representatives from the Myanmar Library Association (MLA). This was designed to ensure that the MLA could hear and take on board feedback from stakeholders when designing the broader capacity building project that followed the interviews. In most BSLA projects, such interviews were the first time the majority of participating associations had consulted stakeholders and members directly. It was observed during the initial pilot phase of BSLA in one country that more formal approaches to interviews that excluded association participants caused challenges later on in the project with buy-in.

Therefore, the risk of interviewees potentially modifying their answers because of the presence of association representatives was weighed against the overall benefits for project design and potential for more significant change in the knowledge and behaviour of association leadership. In practice, responses given in interviews with or without the presence of association representatives did not alter greatly. A schedule summarising interviewees, role, and institutions represented are outlined in Appendix A.

Interview responses were analysed by the author by marking up comments made against each of the questions in Appendix B. This rapid analysis was necessitated by the visit schedule, as the capacity building project objectives had to be discussed and agreed while still on-site. Responses were further analysed after the visits in a narrative report presented to the MLA for discussion and agreement.

2. THE 'OPENING UP'

Formerly known as Burma, Myanmar went through major political changes and upheavals in the twentieth century. These included independence from British administration in 1948, and a 1962 coup d'état. The coup was followed by catastrophic economic failures that eventually led to Myanmar being classified as a Least Developed Country (United Nations Committee for Development Policy, 2016). This status includes those countries among the poorest in the world according to the United Nations. Military rule by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) was tightened in 1988 in response to pro-democracy protests by students, and continued until 2011. The results of a democratic election held in 1990 were not recognised (Myint-U, 2008; Nyun, 2008; Popham, 2012). Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the face of the democratic movement, spent years under house arrest following the 1988 student protests. She was eventually released in November 2010 (Popham, 2012). In the decades since the 1960s Myanmar became increasingly isolated from much of the world, with sanctions imposed by the United States, European Union, and other countries (Nyun, 2008). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was a notable exception, and continued to engage with Myanmar (Nyun, 2008).

The United States and Australia began to change their foreign policy towards Asia and Myanmar in 2008 and 2009. As outlined below, this change could be attributed partly due to the Cyclone Nargis recovery effort, but it also reflected broader changes to foreign policy approaches particularly in the United States. During Barack Obama's presidency, the United States undertook a "pivot towards Asia" in foreign policy approach in recognition of the rise of China and the-then ending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Clinton, 2011). The United States began to change its policy towards Myanmar in 2009, and the early years of this approach provided momentum for a change in US-Myanmar relations. The United States undertook diplomatic visits, encouraged Myanmar to continue working towards democracy, and began to lift some restrictions on international assistance in 2011 (Myers, 2011). Further sanctions were lifted in 2012 (Kapper, 2012). Despite this early progress, by the end of Obama's presidency in 2016 the results of the pivot overall were extremely mixed with continuation in doubt (Green, 2016).

Other regions that changed their policies towards Myanmar included the European Union, where sanctions were lifted in 2013 (EurActiv.com & Reuters, 2013), and Australia. Australia played a leading role in strengthening relations with Myanmar. The first agreement Myanmar signed with a Western country following the opening up was a Memorandum of Understanding on Development Cooperation with Australia (AusAID, 2013). President U Thein Sein noted the importance of this relationship at the time, saying, "I know that Australia and Myanmar are destined to be good partners and more importantly the people of Myanmar and Australia are destined to be good friends" (ABC News, 2013). As outlined later in this article, international relations in the library sector between Myanmar and the world also include strong relationships with Australia, as well as the United States, and South East Asia.

In 2011, the then-new Myanmar President, U Thein Sein, embarked on a series of economic, trade, and media reforms informally known as the 'opening up' of Myanmar to domestic and international investment and cooperation (Head, 2013). After the opening up, economic liberalisation began rapidly with private investment coming from China and Japan including the creation of Special Economic Zones (CCTV, 2013; The Economist, 2013), and the establishment of trade offices (Australian Minister for Trade and Competitiveness, 2013). Events such as the World Economic Forum on East Asia were held in Naypyidaw (also spelled Nay Pyi Taw) in June 2013, which put a spotlight on the country and aimed to spur regional cooperation and investment (World Economic Forum, 2013). Myanmar's achievements were recognised in 2016, when the country graduated from the group of Least Developed Countries and achieved Medium Human Development status (UNDP in Myanmar, 2017).

3. REFORMS TO THE MEDIA AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Media reforms began after 2010 and included new laws (Article 19, 2014), the abolition of pre-publication censorship, and the closure of the Press Scrutiny and Registration Board (BBC News, 2012). Private news-

papers began publication in April 2013 (Wilson, 2013). These reforms also represented an important enabling condition for library reform, as the lack of media plurality greatly limited the level of current access to information that libraries were able to provide in their communities as very few libraries had Internet access, and there were no non-state owned newspapers. Although reported during interviews that their role was not clear, the library sector was considered part of the first wave of media reforms: "Initiatives to craft new media laws in Myanmar, particularly for press, broadcasting, cinema (film), library, and public service media are also a highlight of this first phase of media reform in Myanmar" (UNESCO Bangkok office, 2013). The Ministry of Information began the process to draft a new library law in 2013.

Access to information, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have increased sharply in recent years. The shift to an information age in which information services have increasing importance compared to economies based on manufactured goods has been taking place for decades (Doctor, 1992). However, Myanmar currently has a large rural population, and a largely agrarian based economy (OECD, 2016). The transition to a more mixed economy will take some time yet. Access to technology was dramatically transformed after the beginning of economic liberalisation in 2011, leading to large falls in costs and a dramatic increase in access as Table 1 below indicates. The table includes data from 2013-2016, the most recent year available. In 2013 around 7% of citizens had Internet access in cities, but there was virtually no access in rural areas. However, broadband spectrum was auctioned that same year and as a result the cost started to

fall (Roughneen, 2013). Likewise, access to mobile networks has changed significantly over the last four years. The cost of a SIM card dropped from US$150 to $1.50 in just two years between 2013 and 2015 (Shadrach, 2015). A fledgling tech sector was created, with events held for an emerging community of entrepreneurs and coders (Jacobi, 2013). Myanmar was suddenly part of a digital environment that its neighbours had had years to adapt to.

As a result of economic, trade, and media reforms, the Hluttaw (Parliament) had hundreds of laws to revise and pass and a number of planned laws were not prepared on schedule. As of early 2016, the library law was still being drafted, but progress continued with representatives from the National Library and the library sector closely involved in the consultation process. In hindsight, the delay was beneficial to ensure the law would be more fit for purpose than a rushed law passed in 2013 would have been, as librarians have now had many opportunities to meet and identify what they want from the revised law. It is important not only that civil society can provide their input when laws are drafted, but also that those representing libraries have had the opportunity to align their views and interests. This contrasts with the experience of democratisation in Eastern Europe, where many laws were rewritten after 1990 by Western lawyers to satisfy aid conditionality, but were not consultative and in many cases not effectively implemented (Easterly, 2006).

The early phase of Myanmar's transition culminated in democratic elections in November 2015. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the majority of seats, with 25% of seats still reserved for the military. The election was the first democratic election

Table 1. ICT Indicators, Myanmar

	2013	2014	2015	2016
Percentage of individuals using the Internet (%)[a]	8.00	11.52	21.73	25.07
Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions (per 100 inhabitants)[b]	12.83	54.04	75.68	89.26

a. Source 2013-2016: ITU estimate
b. Source 2013, 2014: Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.
Source 2015, 2016: Posts and Telecommunications Department, Ministry of communications and Information Technology
ITU Statistics, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx

since the disputed election in 1990. Unable to serve as president due to the country's constitution, Suu Kyi instead took up office as de facto leader of Myanmar in a newly created role as State Counsellor (Perria, 2016; Thawnghmung & Robinson, 2017). Although Myanmar has made economic and legal progress since the opening up, there remain many significant challenges yet to be overcome including national reconciliation. At the time of writing, longstanding tensions between the military and Rohingya Muslims had escalated to a human rights crisis, resulting in hundreds of thousands of people fleeing Rakhine State across the border to Bangladesh (Kuok, 2017; Thawnghmung & Robinson, 2017). How the government responds to crises of this nature and how foreign governments manage their foreign relations with Myanmar as a result, noting the shifts in foreign policy towards the country outlined earlier, could potentially destabilise continued development of Myanmar and its relationship in the world (Myint-U, 2017).

4. THE ROLE OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND LIBRARIES IN TRANSITIONS TO DEMOCRACY

What makes the existence of libraries, and their role in providing access to information, relevant to the process of transitioning to democracy, and to the 'opening up' in Myanmar? Access to information is a fundamental requirement for personal and social development, and for participation (Habermas, 1989, as cited in Britz, 2004; IFLA, 2014). It is an enabler for governments to deliver quality, inclusive services to their people (Ashwill & Norton, 2015). Knowledge represents a means of power (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Britz, 2004; Foucault, 1977, as cited in Doctor, 1992), information has an important role in state building (Rigterink & Schomerus, 2016), and information can support democratisation (Byrne, 2003). Reflecting this, IFLA and UNESCO assert that public libraries are a public good and should be delivered and supported by government (IFLA/UNESCO, 1994). Doctor (1992, p. 44) situates access to information within the context of empowerment, defining information democracy as

"a socio-political system in which all people are guar- anteed the right to benefit from access to infor-

mation resources. Information democracy deals with empowerment, with ensuring that people have the tools they need to participate in the decision-making structures that affect their daily lives."

Referring to the same conditions but from a deficit perspective, Britz (2004) defines information poverty as "that situation in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately. It is further characterized by a lack of essential information and a poorly developed information infrastructure."

For libraries to be fully effective in overcoming these conditions, Britz (2004) asserts that mere access is not enough, and that people must have an ability to derive benefits from information through skills. It is argued that it is not necessarily that new information is needed, especially in poor communities, but that expertise to make that information accessible is required (Heeks, 1999, as cited in Britz, 2004). Many countries in Asia, including Myanmar have reported high literacy rates in the past decades. Literacy makes an important contribution to freedoms, as deprivation and poverty are correlated to communities with high levels of illiteracy. Education and literacy help to facilitate social change, which benefits communities more broadly (Sen, 1999).

Writing in the year after the first web browser was released, Doctor (1992) pointed to the impact of pre-World Wide Web services and the telephone as resources that serve to provide access. Commodities such as the telephone also contribute to generating freedom (Sen, 1999). Today the steady rate of adoption of ICTs and mobile phones in Myanmar has the potential to have the same effect. However, digital exclusion exists in all countries, no matter how developed. Ensuring that resources are available across a country and providing public access help to address this gap (Doctor, 1992). Recognising that such inequalities needed to be addressed, and in addition to government investment, philanthropic funders including the Open Societies Foundation through projects with EIFL in Central and Eastern Europe, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Global Libraries Initiative in the United States, Eastern Europe, Latin America and other regions, invested in ICT, training in libraries, and sector support from the 2000s onward (Streatfield et al., 2015). Several

countries in Latin America transitioned to democracy in the 1980s, and the dissolution of the USSR resulted in Eastern Europe transitioning in the early 1990s (Coleman & Lawson-Remer, 2013). For many of the countries involved in the projects in Eastern Europe, these investments occurred just a few years after transition to democracy. Projects in Latin America and Africa followed "structural adjustment" programmes of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s (Mutula, 2003). Each of these countries was considered by funders to have a sufficient number of libraries before transition, which provided an existing resource to build on. Ukraine, for example, had thousands of libraries, public and academic, before and after transition in 1992 (IFLA & Bradley, 2012).

Reform can often be challenging and non-linear, however. Post-democracy, services require investment in new policies, funding, resources, and training required to fulfil new roles (Bell, 2007). For instance, South African libraries under apartheid had significant difficulties including segregation in its professional associations, and censorship laws. In the 1980s the importance of information began to be recognised as being "just as important a national resource as manpower, money and machinery" (Nassimbeni, 1988, p. 156, as cited in Bell, 2007). The library sector saw the need for change in role and purpose, and to reassess the appropriateness of LIS curricula coming from the Global North. In the 1990s the library sector believed they would have an important role in contributing to the new South Africa (Wyley, 1993, p. 20, as cited in Bell, 2007). Despite their optimism, libraries faced many challenges in the period immediately after democratisation due to funding cuts, a lack of investment by provinces, and the falling value of the Rand. As community-level assets, libraries must recognise that they compete with others, and in some cases must partner to obtain resources (Ashwill & Norton, 2015). Although the social, political, and economic situations of South Africa and Myanmar differ greatly, this example shows how librarians must be prepared to advocate in the period after transition to prevent backsliding and to ensure they can fulfil new roles in a democratic society.

Young democracies as a whole can also face challenges after transition. Within the South-East Asia region, the democratic status of countries is very mixed. Freedom House designates countries as "electoral democracies" if they have met minimum standards for electoral process and political rights. Table 2 includes the 10 countries that are members of ASEAN covering data for the period between 1990-2015. As noted in the Table, some countries have seen sustained designation as electoral democracies, while others such as Thailand have lost this designation. It is unclear at what date the data were collected for Myanmar in 2015, and if this occurred before the General Election. Regardless of whether Myanmar's status changes in the next survey, having few neighbours that are electoral democracies may or may not impact on Myanmar but at the very least means there are only a few role models amongst their neighbours, who can provide support, and potentially prevent backsliding (Coleman & Lawson-Remer, 2013).

5. LIBRARIES IN MYANMAR

In Myanmar, libraries are classed as 'government,' and 'self-sustaining' or private. The definition of government libraries in Myanmar not only includes libraries in government departments, but also any publicly funded library, such as the university libraries, National Library, and public libraries. Self-sustaining and private libraries include village and township level community libraries, monastery libraries, and libraries established by private individuals or local NGOs. There are estimated to be close to 5,000 'active' libraries in Myanmar (Beyond Access, 2013a; The Asia Foundation, 2014). This number includes academic, public, and monastery libraries.

As a country with strong Buddhist traditions, Myanmar has thousands of monasteries across the country, a vast number of which have libraries. Many of these have evolved to play a more public library-like function, and are open to the public. In most cases, collections are limited and not usually staffed by trained librarians. However, monks were important teachers and keepers of knowledge until colonialism, and have gained this status again more recently. Buddhist palm-leaf manuscripts are particularly important in the country's cultural heritage and are a treasured part of several library collections including university and national libraries, but are vulnerable due to high humidity (Tripathi, 2012).

Table 2. Electoral Democracy in ASEAN member countries, Freedom House

Survey Edition	1990-91	2000-01	2010	2017
Year(s) Under Review	1990	2000	2009	2015
Brunei	No	No	No	No
Cambodia	No	No	No	No
Indonesia	No	**Yes**	Yes	**Yes**
Laos	No	No	No	No
Malaysia	No	No	No	No
Myanmar	No	No	No	No
Philippines	**Yes**	Yes	No	**Yes**
Singapore	No	No	No	No
Thailand	**Yes**	**Yes**	No	No

Source: Electoral Democracies 1988-2016, Freedom House https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world

Libraries attached to cultural institutions are amongst the most popular and well-equipped in Myanmar, providing collections and services modelled on their respective countries as part of broader cultural efforts (US Embassy in Burma, n.d.). The British Council has 20 branches across the country, including a large, well-lit, air-conditioned branch in downtown Yangon. The American Center, United States Information Service also supports the library profession by providing training to librarians on a range of topics including outreach and marketing for community libraries, together with the library association.

Apart from these outliers, most libraries focus on collections that in many cases are sorely in need of updating. At the time of interviews in 2013, user focused approaches such as meeting user needs and reference services were largely unknown concepts. Public libraries in larger towns and cities remain largely outdated, with varying quality and age of book stock, levels of training, and facilities (Nyein, 2016). As in several countries, librarians must pay from their own salaries if books are lost, making them reluctant to openly lend materials and resulting in most library books being kept behind locked cabinets. For many years public libraries were not viewed positively by citizens, and were seen largely as propaganda. The Ministry of Information launched an ambitious project in the 2000s to overcome collection gaps and to develop an e-library; however, this mainly consisted of scanning existing books published by the government publisher and side loading the files as PDFs in a few libraries. Such activities had limited impact due to the nature of the content being scanned, limited access to technology as aging computers fell into disrepair, and the likelihood that the practice may no longer be legal once Myanmar updated its copyright laws. Many public libraries, as well as other services and institutions, are housed in inappropriate buildings for their use and lack light during electricity shortages (The Asia Foundation, 2014). The design of public library buildings must also be more appropriate to local weather conditions and frequent power outages.

Kaut-tan Township Library near Thanlyin was chosen for the author to visit, and described as being typical of many public libraries in the country. Until recently the Ministry of Information decided where to open libraries and it was not always clear that communities were consulted on where they should be located. The

local community was often required to fund ongoing maintenance and the costs of acquiring materials after libraries opened. Many libraries of this type received donated books but frequently these were not relevant to the local community. They could therefore be perceived as a burden for the community to run, contributing to a negative image. In spite of this, library volunteers worked hard to maintain buildings and the collections to attract visitors, and were keen to find ways to offer new services like story time.

In contrast, smaller township libraries tend to have a self-sustaining funding model that does not rely on government support, and are often built in a more traditional Burmese architectural style accounting for local conditions, with an open area underneath for sitting and an elevated room that keeps materials dry and circulates warm air (Beyond Access, 2013a). However, book stock is often very poor and many library workers are volunteers who have received no training (Michaels, 2013):

> [Before 2010] there weren't many libraries yet [besides government-owned libraries], especially in townships. Most libraries were attached to monasteries, but there weren't many libraries like mine—outside, renting a room and operating like that, although now there are a lot.

As the number of self-sustaining, independent libraries increased, there was a risk that government and self-sustaining libraries would develop separately from each other and compete for resources. This has been ameliorated somewhat by development projects that work with both types of libraries. As the library sector began to develop, it was agreed by librarians that it was important for all libraries, government and private, to work together to improve the perception of libraries, build trust, and to develop new services for the public.

As outlined earlier, Myanmar had strict censorship laws as recently as 2012. Under military rule, libraries were also highly regulated by the Ministry of Information. Before the opening up, efforts to establish private libraries were closely monitored. Licenses had to be obtained, and premises were frequently inspected. Monk Asshin Issariya, for example, established a small university library in 2000 but this was closed following an inspection by the Military Intelligence under threat of closing the entire university. He later opened 14 libraries in monks' organisations, with a stock of secret polit-

ical books (Popham, 2012). In more recent years, a very small number of private homes in Myanmar converted rooms to public use libraries and received licenses as government reforms continued apace (Michaels, 2013):

> When the Ministry of Information's director general visited Ye Htet Oo's library in 2010 [Tharapa Library], it could have been disastrous. Ye Htet Oo, then a recent college graduate, was running his new library in downtown Rangoon on the sly, without approval from the former military regime, and was told he could face three months in jail for every book he lent without permission from the censorship board. Unable to get a library license from the government, which saw libraries as a way to spread subversive ideas, he fronted his operation as a bookshop but kept a collection of unapproved library books hidden in a back room. Then one day, unknown to the young bibliophile, the ministry's director general—who has since become the deputy minister of information and President Thein Sein's spokesman—entered the "bookshop" and walked straight into the secret room […] in an unexpected turn of events, the ministry agreed to not only allow Ye Htet Oo's operation to continue, but to actually let it expand.

Before the opening up, academic libraries were operating with severe constraints in funding, access to technology and resources, and limited services for library users (Nyein, 2016). This further restricted access to current research and learning materials, beyond those that resulted from censorship. Interviews with librarians in 2013 found that libraries generally worked independently of one another as there were no library networks, shared standards, or guidelines across the country. However, librarians readily talk to and collaborate with each other, including through the Myanmar Library Association, to bridge this gap. There was no LIS material available at the time in the Myanmar language, which created a barrier to adopting international standards and guidelines, and universities and library schools had limited access to current LIS research and journals. Myanmar did not have a national library service or institution that helps to coordinate the work of public and community libraries and their relationship with the National Library.

Many factors contributed to the underdevelopment of libraries. These include the decimation of higher education following protests involving students in 1988,

censorship, lack of content from beyond the country's borders, and lack of government funding (Popham, 2012). In addition, widespread basic infrastructure issues persist such as transport, electricity, internet access, eJournals, book stock, and inadequate facilities as well as a shortage of trained librarians (Lek Choh, 2015; Nyein, 2016). Despite these challenges, Myanmar libraries led the world in preservation and conservation of palm-leaf manuscripts, with significant collections at the National Library and several academic libraries, and the breadth of the number of libraries across the country provides for an established, local infrastructure for further development.

6. NARGIS AS A FOCUSING EVENT FOR LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT

Conditions that can lead to opportunity for agenda-setting or policy reform become "policy windows" that can then be acted upon by governments (Kingdon, 1984). A focusing event, like a natural disaster, is one such condition that can cause policymakers, civil society, the media, and others to pay attention to an issue, and to act (Birkland, 1998). Cyclone Nargis in 2008 was the worst natural disaster in Myanmar's history. The government's initial response to reject international humanitarian assistance was widely condemned abroad (Lee, 2008). The government also decided to proceed with a planned constitutional referendum in the days following the cyclone, despite delays in the areas most badly affected. After negotiation with the United Nations Secretary General, the government changed its position and agreed to open up the country to humanitarian workers from any country (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2009; Popham, 2012).

Nargis had a marked impact on the library sector that paved the way for future development. As in the humanitarian sector, there was limited external assistance coming into the library sector in terms of resources or expertise at the time of the disaster. To aid in recovery, the Nargis Library Recovery project was formed to help libraries in affected areas rebuild by distributing books and renovating public libraries. The project managed to distribute more than 500,000 books to 750 libraries, covering every region of the country, and offered basic training for village library workers amongst other ac-

tivities (Kaung, 2013). The project operated until 2015 before being folded into the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (Badgley, 2015).

The government's change in policy to permit foreign humanitarian assistance gradually made it easier for other forms of assistance to come into the country, including library materials and experts (Kaung, 2013). The administration of the Nargis Library Recovery project (later the Myanmar Library Aid Foundation) was based in the United States; however, the project was managed locally in Myanmar. A key factor in viewing Nargis as a focusing event for the library sector is that the initial request for assistance came from prominent librarians in Myanmar who recognised the need (Badgley, 2015; Myanmar Book Aid & Preservation Foundation, 2016) rather than being offered or imposed from outside the country. Local ownership and leadership, with support from abroad, paved the foundation for more recent library development efforts.

Learned seniors have an important role in Myanmar society and their support and guidance to younger colleagues is of great importance. Sithu Thaw Kaung has an important and respected role at the centre of librarianship in Myanmar. He founded the Myanmar Library Association, the Library school at Yangon University, the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF), was Chief Librarian at Universities Central Library, and has been associated with the National Library of Australia. Dr. Thant Thaw Kaung is a prominent bookseller and has been an executive committee member of the Myanmar Libraries Foundation and developed the MBAPF into an important partner for library projects in the country. Their sustained efforts, together with those of many senior colleagues in the years before and after Nargis, strengthened local organisations and made them trusted partners for development projects in the time that followed. Important too, was recognition nationally and internationally that library organisations including MBAPF and the Myanmar Library Association could and should take leading roles in steering the future of libraries in Myanmar, rather than development being driven by organisations based overseas.

In Nargis several factors came together to provide an opportunity for the library sector to be developed following the disaster, and to gain experience in building strong organisations that could distribute materials,

provide training, and collaborate internationally. If Nargis had not occurred, the 'opening up' politically may still have happened, but it may have been that libraries would have been less prepared for development or they could have been overrun by external offers of support if they had not had the leadership and experience gained through the Nargis recovery.

6.1. Partnerships for Library Development Begin after Nargis

In the years after Nargis, librarians in Myanmar increased contacts with organisations including IFLA, EIFL, and the Asia Foundation to seek funding, resources, and training. Some requests were as straightforward as the need for up-to-date cataloguing materials (e.g. copies of Dewey Decimal Classification), while others identified the need for electronic resources, library infrastructure, librarian training, and significant capacity building. It became apparent that with a number of potential international partners and projects coming into Myanmar around the same time, coordination would be essential to avoid overlap and overextending a small number of key contacts who would have a coordinating role for projects. Concerns were raised in the development sector more broadly that an influx of development and aid funding that relied on a few key players could lead to inefficiency and waste and that this risk should be factored into any project in Myanmar (Hirsch, 2013):

> Rieffel and Fox (2013) say that a flood of aid-related visitors seeking meetings with Burmese officials has compromised aid effectiveness more than any other factor. The report also criticizes the practice of some donors of "throwing money at problems" and the reliance by multiple donor agencies on the same prominent local NGOs for project implementation— a practice that overburdens those groups "while neglecting smaller but competent NGOs." Particularly troubling, the report says, is the donor practice of hiring Burmese public sector or civil society employees, thus "hollowing out the organizations they are leaving."

So that they can gain an understanding of how libraries operate in other countries, opportunities to go abroad or undertake in-service training are sought after by many librarians and are often necessary, but come with some challenges. Such trips, which can last several months, risked taking the best and brightest out of their country at a time when they were most needed during Myanmar's rapid development. Opportunities for in-service training, library visits, and in-country training therefore had to be shared amongst a wide group to avoid overly relying on a few.

Librarians in Myanmar have begun to demand that training in new skills be provided locally as the role of libraries evolves. For those entering the profession, there are several academic courses in librarianship. The approach to education in formal academic settings remains somewhat traditional (largely rote) and theoretical with limited exposure to practical experience or technology; however, this is beginning to change (Missingham, 2017). Several Library and Information Departments in Myanmar universities, including at Yangon and Mandalay universities, provide a network of cascade training for ongoing professional development, and short courses for those new to library work.

A range of international organisations launched projects in Myanmar libraries in response to requests for support, most commencing in 2013 or later. A non-exhaustive list of some of the development projects and visits implemented in Myanmar libraries that commenced at that time included:

- IFLA, Building Strong Library Associations programme, 2013-2016, capacity building in partnership with Myanmar Library Association (IFLA, 2016; Robinson, 2015), partnership with Singapore National Library Board to coordinate book donations (Lek Choh, 2015)
- EIFL, eLibrary project providing electronic access to scholarly resources and training in several universities, establishment of a consortium (EIFL, 2013; Missingham, 2017; Nyein, 2016)
- eTekkatho, a project hosted by Manchester University to provide access to electronic resources (eTekkatho, n.d.)
- In-service training over several months for groups of librarians in the US and Singapore, hosted by organisations including USAID/University of Washington, and Singapore National Library Board
- Beyond Access technology training for women and girls (Beyond Access, 2013a)
- Technology and Social Change Group, University of Washington (TASCHA) mobile information literacy curricula and training (Clark, 2015)

- Asia Foundation book donations and school library development, in partnership with the Myanmar Library Association
- International Parliamentary Union development project, capacity building for MPs, and developing a parliamentary library (Aye & Fraser, 2014; Fraser & Kyaw, 2015)

Projects were funded by a range of sources including individual donations, private philanthropy, universities, governments, and overseas development assistance. Australia provided several sources of assistance through projects or in-kind. Australian Aid, known at the time as AusAID, Australia's overseas aid development agency, was a contributor to the Inter-Parliamentary Union project to develop a parliamentary library serving MPs in Nay Pyi Taw, for example (AusAID, n.d.). The National Library of Australia is a long-time supporter of the MLA and contributed to the earlier Nargis recovery effort (McKenzie, 2010).

Planning and implementing projects in Myanmar faced some initial, unexpected challenges compared to development projects in other countries in Asia. At the outset of IFLA's project, for example, the Myanmar Library Association required agreement from the Ministry of Information for IFLA to visit Myanmar, the Ministry needed to approve training topics, and librarians needed (and those who are public servants still require) official permission for travel domestically or abroad to attend workshops and meetings. This necessitated additional time and administration for such approvals to be factored into planning, and sensitivity and flexibility on behalf of both local librarians and IFLA.

The international projects that commenced in 2013 or 2014 began in a climate where the country was working towards democracy, but that transition was not yet guaranteed. Elections were scheduled for late 2015 with the National League for Democracy expected to win the majority of seats in that election. There was speculation at the time that constitutional change would follow, which would decrease the percentage of seats to be held by the military. Ultimately, although the election was held freely, the percentage of seats held by the Tatmadaw did not change, and remains at 25%. There was therefore a not-insignificant element of risk when these organisations, including IFLA and others, decided to begin their projects in 2013. If the country had backslid on the pace of reforms at that time the ability of projects to continue would have been in doubt, for example, if financial sanctions were imposed once again preventing funds from being transferred into the country. As IFLA had had a relationship through the Myanmar Library Association's membership since the early 1990s, IFLA committed to continuing to collaborate with the MLA regardless of the outcome of the election, even if financial resources could not be committed. This was agreed by IFLA as being important to ensure stability in professional relations, and to keep lines of communication open with the country.

Around 2013 the government of Myanmar also began to express interest in library development that added further expectations on the sector. The Deputy Minister for Information, for instance, was enthusiastic about building an electronic library, but needed to develop an understanding of the skills, staffing, digitisation best practices, and technology requirements to make it a reality. Aung San Suu Kyi's dream of a network of public libraries was well reported in the Burmese press, although she commented on this ambition much less often since formally re-entering politics (Beyond Access, 2013b):

> It's the librarian who makes or breaks the library, concluded Suu Kyi, as she explained what's coming next in her effort to launch these [two mobile] libraries. The librarians must be well-trained in order to reach the people the library is meant to serve, to provide content and services they value, and to respond to them in order to keep them returning for more.

Initiatives such as eLibrary Myanmar and eTekkatho were focused on access to scholarly electronic resources, and helped to bridge the gap in access to scholarly information and skills in partnership with a growing number of universities beyond the major cities of Yangon and Mandalay (eTekkatho, n.d.; Missingham, 2017; Nyein, 2016). The eLibrary Myanmar project also began to develop mechanisms for libraries to coordinate services between libraries, so that they could better manage scarce resources and give librarians more time to develop user services. The Myanmar Academic Library Consortium has been formed, and will support cooperation between academic libraries (Nyein, 2016).

The Hluttaw (Parliamentary) Library received significant capacity building investments with support from

the Inter-Parliamentary Union, United Nations Development Programme, and the House of Commons Library in the UK to develop the library staff, provide access to resources, and train members of parliament on research skills and legal resources (Aye & Fraser, 2014; Fraser & Kyaw, 2015).

The next generation of new librarians will have an important role (Missingham, 2017). They are increasingly learning English, which helps them to participate in conferences and activities with other library colleagues in the region, and to learn about libraries from abroad. They will benefit from practical training and experience, including information literacy and digital literacy. The librarians most at risk, however, are those in the middle generation who started working in libraries in or before 1988 and who have limited exposure to up-to-date library practices, and limited English skills.

7. THE MYANMAR LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Library associations have an important role in uniting the profession around a common platform for advocacy and professional development (IFLA & Bradley, 2012). The Burma Library Association was founded in the 1960s, but its activities were disrupted by the 1962 coup d'état. The Myanmar Library Association (MLA) was formed in 1990 and received registration in 1992. According to IFLA's archives, IFLA helped to more firmly establish the Association as early as 1993 as part of a regional workshop on UNESCO guidelines. Although largely isolated, a small number of librarians from Myanmar participated in various regional activities hosted by the IFLA Action for Development through Libraries programme (IFLA ALP) in the 1990s and 2000s, and were also active in regional organisations including the Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians (CONSAL), and Conference of Directors of National Libraries (CDNL-AO). During the years of Myanmar's military rule the association's activities were limited, and primarily focused on raising funds for librarians to attend foreign conferences. Very few librarians had the opportunity to travel abroad for training or to visit libraries. Likewise, during the years when Aung San Suu Kyi called on tourists to boycott travel to Myanmar (McGeown, 2006), few librarians travelled to the country for professional visits.

In 2010, the association began offering training courses across the country (L. Curach, personal communication, May 2013) with its own trainers, which was an important step in training more librarians and paraprofessional library workers. Demand for training far exceeded capacity, however. Because few librarians could afford or get permission to travel to Yangon, or abroad, there was a well-established though informal cascade system in place with librarians being very willing to pass their new skills on to others. Other activities included conducting seminars to keep members up to date, publishing a newsletter, and sharing expertise about preserving palm-leaf manuscripts. Librarians had limited access to professional information, and until the Inter-Parliamentary Union/IFLA *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services* was translated in 2013, there were no international library guidelines available in the Myanmar language. Unlike most other local organisations, the MLA had a bank account that could accept foreign funds. However, sanctions and embargoes until 2013 in the European Union and the United States greatly limited foreign donations.

In response to a request for support from the MLA in late 2012, IFLA implemented its Building Strong Library Associations programme in partnership with the MLA between 2013-2016 (IFLA, 2016; Lek Choh, 2015; Robinson, 2015). The Building Strong Library Associations programme offers a strategic and coordinated approach to capacity building and sustainability of library associations across a range of areas including strategic planning, communication, member services, partnerships across and outside of the library sector, and advocacy (IFLA & Bradley, 2012). These capacities are built through workshops and training, mentoring, and activities with other associations. The programme has been delivered in over 80 countries through a variety of models, customised to the needs and situation of each association and country. The model in Myanmar included support from IFLA staff for project planning, needs assessment and impact evaluation, funding from IFLA for these activities, partnerships within the region, and the support of a core trainer, Michael Robinson, who had experience of working in several countries in the region and returned to the country on several occasions to deliver activities in line with MLA's needs (Robinson, 2015).

The project timing was strategic – IFLA was ap-

proached by the MLA in late 2012, and the project began in 2013 as the government continued the process of 'opening up.' The project was timed to conclude in early 2016 just as a newly elected democratic government was predicted to take office. The transformational role that access to information and libraries can play in nation building in a new democracy therefore became a key focus during the life of the project. Under the BSLA umbrella, MLA participated in four workshops, a stakeholder meeting, regional activities with other associations (IFLA, 2016), and partnered with the Singapore Library Association and National Library Board on book donations and training (Lek Choh, 2015). The project goals were:

- **Role**: to develop understanding of the role of associations in society amongst the MLA members and librarians;
- **Governance**: to develop committees and branches across the country to support the association as demand for training and member services grow;
- P**artnerships**: to investigate options for more formal partnerships with Myanmar Libraries Foundation (in addition to existing MOU), and other organisations, and to develop strategies for dealing with requests for support;
- **Collaboration and coordination**: to strengthen MLA's role as a leader of the library profession in their country, and to play a coordinating role amongst development projects;
- **Library development**: to participate in, and where relevant to lead, projects and policies for development of Myanmar libraries such as library legislation, support for library resources, and the role of libraries in Myanmar society.

The impact assessment at the end of the project including interviews, document analysis, and observation concluded that MLA made significant progress in each of these areas during the life of the project. Many of the changes were supported by broader reforms in the country, such as those that meant that it was possible for non-government librarians to join the Executive Committee (board) for the first time, which spurred a more representative, inclusive association. At the time the project commenced in 2013, the board was primarily composed of staff from the National Library due to association membership being restricted to public sector employees. The MLA relied heavily on a network of advisors, many of whom were retired to bolster the expertise on the board. As restrictions on NGOs and membership organisations began to ease, the board took advantage of these changes and elected a more diverse board that included librarians from a range of sectors.

By 2016, requirements for joining the association had also eased as part of broader reforms, permitting any librarian including public librarians to join and led to an increase in membership numbers. By early 2016, MLA had offered several training courses, partnered with the Asia Foundation to develop six high school libraries, and had links to a model public library project in collaboration with Singapore, EIFL, and Beyond Access through its Executive Committee members. These activities have strengthened the MLA's role in implementing projects and supporting library development. Following the transition to democracy MLA has sought to increase its advocacy role and had already taken part in consultations on both new copyright and national library laws.

A challenge for any capacity building project is maintaining progress made after the project formally ends. A major opportunity for learning and raising the profile of the association and Myanmar libraries will be the next Conference of Southeast Asian Libraries (CONSAL) conference in 2018. MLA will be hosting the conference, and are determined to use the opportunity to highlight to policy makers the contribution libraries make to the country and its development. The conference is also helping the MLA to develop new skills, as it is the first time the association has organised and hosted a major conference. Other capacity building projects involving the MLA or its senior leaders continue in Myanmar, including a new project between Australian National University and University of Yangon Department of Library and Information Science to develop digital literacy capabilities (Missingham, 2017).

8. CONCLUSION

There is great potential for libraries in Myanmar to serve their communities now and in the future. They represent an existing, local network of infrastructure and people across the country. Libraries could play an essential role in education – both formal and lifelong

learning. Projects like mobile information literacy and digital literacy are beginning to address these skill needs (Clark, 2015; Missingham, 2017). These new roles help to change the current perception of Myanmar's public libraries, and are achievable for librarians that are just now beginning to build their confidence in library services.

Although schooled in a traditional way and reluctant for many years in the era of censorship to openly express opinions, librarians during my visits would frequently ask, "tell me your idea to improve." However, paying attention to building a culture of critical reflection supports Myanmar librarians to develop their own ideas for the sector and their role, and resilience so that ideas are not imposed from abroad lacking local context. For this reason any recommendations given in this paper are those that have been mutually identified by both the author and local librarians. MLA's leaders have confidence in outlining what they need for the sector. This includes continued exchange between local librarians and experts from around the world to bring LIS practice and education up to date, balanced copyright reforms, and a library law that underpins the roles libraries have in education, culture, and preserving the knowledge of the nation. They also seek to consulted and counted as part of civil society on issues including freedom of information, and media reforms. Media, Right to Information campaigners, and others ought to seize the opportunity to partner with libraries as laws including Right to Information, copyright, and a library law are drafted. Practicing librarians are gaining information literacy and digital literacy skills through projects such as eLibrary Myanmar and Beyond Access, and these skills need to continue to scale across the country. These priorities reflect those outlined earlier in this paper that underpin the role of access to information in democracy – literacy, skills, and access to content and technology.

These reforms, together with advocacy for investments to update library buildings, showcase model libraries, build collections, and provide resources for programming, mean that librarians will have a full agenda in the coming years. MLA is now operating well, and provides a platform for the advocacy and coordination needed to work towards these goals. Myanmar has thousands of academic, government, public, and community libraries that can support the imple-

mentation of reforms across the whole country at the local level. Society will need to support and champion libraries so that they can achieve these goals.

Myanmar continues to face a number of challenges on its pathway to development, including human rights issues as well as economic and resource planning challenges. Much of the initial enthusiasm (Myint-U, 2017; Perria, 2016) about the 2015 election has faded, but regardless of politics Myanmar's libraries must continue to develop so that they can provide the access to information and skills people need to improve their own lives.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED BY THE AUTHOR DURING TWO NEEDS ASSESSMENT VISITS

Interviews were conducted during two visits, the first in June 2013 and the second in January 2016. Interviews were also undertaken with MLA representatives at regional events in 2014 and 2016 in Indonesia and the Philippines. As full consent could not be obtained for the names and organisation of each interviewee to be published, a summary is included below.

Visit 1, June 2013:

18 interviews were conducted over four days. The author and trainers were accompanied at most interviews by at least two representatives from the MLA.

Library type	Description
Academic libraries	Four academic libraries (three in Yangon, one in Thanlyin). Interviews conducted with Library Directors, and groups of staff at varied levels
Public libraries	Three libraries (two in Yangon, one in Kaut-tan). Interviews conducted with Library Managers, and volunteers
Library schools	One library school (Yangon), interviewed Lecturers and group of students
National, Cultural and Other Libraries	National Library (Yangon Branch), two cultural institutions. Interviews conducted with Library Directors
Library Organisations	Myanmar Library Association, four other organisations. Interviews conducted with President and Board members of each organisation
Individuals	Two interviews with senior library figures

Visit 2, January 2016:

This visit included a series of activities that provided additional opportunities for observation and informal interviews. These included a workshop, stakeholder meeting, and a post-visit symposium organised by the Myanmar Book Aid Preservation Foundation, USAID, Asia Foundation, University of Washington, and other partners.

12 interviews were conducted over three days in addition to the observational events. In addition to the author and trainer, the IFLA Secretary General, and two MLA representatives were present at most interviews.

Library type	Description
Academic libraries	Two academic libraries (Yangon). Interviews conducted with Library Directors, and groups of staff at varied levels
Public libraries	Two libraries (Yangon). Interviews conducted with Library Manager
Library schools	One library school (Yangon), interviewed Lecturers and group of students
National, Cultural and Other Libraries	National Library (Yangon Branch). Interviews conducted with Library Directors
Library Organisations	Myanmar Library Association, four other organisations. Interviews conducted with President, Board members or staff of each organisation
Individuals	Two interviews with senior library figures

Appendix B
SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Type of information	Relevant questions
National political/ social/organisational context	
Nature of the political system	Extent of freedom of the press and assembly?
National economic and social situation	Dependability of cash flows? State of transport infrastructure? Are there isolated regions?
Technological infrastructure	Extent and penetration of new technologies and telecommunications? Legislation about new technologies?
Cultural dimensions	Languages used, availability of translation facilities? Language barriers?
	Extent of reading and study culture? Predominant belief systems? Extent of culture of philanthropy?
National context of libraries	
State of development of the profession	Size of the library system? Extent of investment by government and others in libraries? Demographic profile of library workers (age, ethnicity)? Existence of or plans for library legislation? Preferred methods of communication amongst librarians? Are library statistics available; at what levels; and in what form? Are they used? How?
Academic and professional education and training	Types and levels of academic and professional qualification? Numbers qualified? Formal professional development opportunities available? Take up of professional development? Levels of skill and use of ICT by library staff? Do librarians have relationships with each other outside of the Association structure?
Library Association operating context	
Relationships of the Association	What are the relationships to/with government? Nature of existing and potential alliances and partnerships? Capacity to raise funds externally?
Organisation of the Association	Financial sustainability? what are its main resources? How is the Association incorporated and does this suit its current purpose? Are there any regional associations? How many? How does LA compare with like associations in the Country in other professions?
Association's history	How long has the Association existed? How long has it existed in its current form? What were the main features of any changes along the way? Is there a tradition of organizing – e.g. unions, copyright?
Operation of the Association	Association's goals and objectives - Is there a development plan and related documentation? Governance – how are Association decisions made and by whom? How centralized is the governance of the Association? How many members are engaged as committee members? Is there a culture of reflexivity? Are there barriers to entry – e.g. can non-librarians join? Conferences and other events organised? Is there structure around officer roles? -expectations, recognition, volunteer motivation tactics? What will the IFLA training look like?
Relationship with members	Is the association welcoming? Cost, exclusivity, etc. Number and type of invitations to participate in committees, conferences