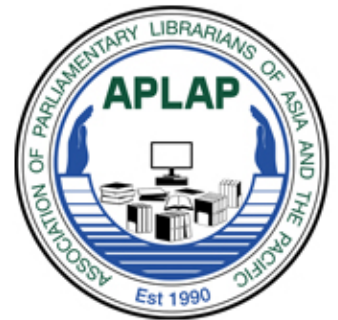


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*Reopening the Library of People's Majlis Maldives
during the Covid crisis*

Library of People's Majlis

Title

Reopening the Library of People's Majlis Maldives during the Covid crisis

Abstract

This article looks at reopening the Library of People's Majlis in the Maldives within the new parliament administrative building and the developments before, during and after the opening. This task was initiated in the middle of the COVID crisis. In this article, the history of the library will be looked at and after that will be looking at the new developments - hiring new staff, utilisation of technical standards and the acquisition of new resources.

Keywords

Parliament library, Digital archive, library development, South Asia, Maldives, COVID crisis, Strategic plan, parliament history, collection, reference and research services, outreach services, collaboration,

Introduction

In a nutshell parliament is interested in the whole universe of knowledge (Cuninghame, 2009). Thus, for a parliament library it is an imperative that the resources and services at hand and through collaboration should be systematically organized for maximum efficacy and efficiency.

The library of People's Majlis has been functioning with minimal services for a period of at least 10 years and a reopening was envisaged after the appointment of a new speaker in 2019. As such work was initiated for this task.

A new strategic plan with five key objectives for the library was formulated. The 5 objectives are:

1. developing the structure, policies, procedures, and tools for information sharing and use.
2. developing and maintain a relevant physical and digital collection.
3. delivering high quality library and research services additionally increasing digital access and services.
4. supporting the Parliament's engagement with the community by creating and enhancing outreach activities.
5. collaborating and sharing best practices with stakeholders to develop a community of practice and achieve overall objectives.

History of the People's Majlis library

The Maldives has a presidential system and a unicameral parliament known as the People's Majlis. The Majlis has the authority to enact, amend and revise laws. People's Majlis consists of 87 elected members from respective constituencies. The Majlis continues for 5 years from the date of its first sitting. The current 19th Majlis convened on 28th May 2019. (IPU, 2021). The motto of the Majlis is to *Make decisions by consultation*. (وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ)

The Majlis library was officially opened on 21 June 2006 by the then speaker Mr. Ahmed Zahir. A physical library was created in the parliament building opened in 1998 but due to space constraints was not utilized before that. The library collection at that time consisted of legal sources, physical magazines and newspapers and later on was moved to a smaller area due to lack of space. Throughout the years various ad hoc work were done for acquiring resources and giving services but due to spatial and training limitations, the library service was non-existent.

Improving support services to Majlis, its committees and members has been identified as a key strategic objective in the strategic plan exercise carried out in 2014. As such a Library and research facility for members, modernisation of archive and providing qualified and experienced substantive subject specialists for research were identified as key actions. In addition, reforming and modernising the Majlis library and its management and as part of this process modernizing the archives with extension of ICT application which will allow for all the past paper-based Hansards to be converted to digital copies were identified as further actions.

Gopalan (2011: 9) identified four key areas which require in-depth research in the areas of legal research, public finance and economy, infrastructure and social policy. In addition, the need to create a modern library building providing both print and digital resources, processes and services were also highlighted.

Patterson (2014: 27) highlighted the importance of having a functional library in terms of policies, technological access on-line, space, staff and written materials. He also highlights the work being done and emphasized the crucial role of the parliament library resources.

New developments

A new speaker passionate about libraries and archives and a new administrative building with a dedicated library and archive space paved the way for the library to be initiated to develop to its fruition.

Scanning of archival material has been ongoing from December 2019 onwards. The immense task of opening the physical library was initiated from August 2020 with the hiring of new staff. A new Deputy Director was hired to head the library and an additional archive staff was hired as well. A spacious new

floor space has been assigned in the new parliament building. The library is spacious, as a result which would cater for a physical collection as well as comfortably work to make a digital collection. This was a wonderful opportunity to develop the parliament library.

The new library was arranged to be opened on 4th of Feb 2021 on the first day of People's Majlis. Speaker of the People's Majlis, President Mohamed Nasheed announced that a librarian has been selected for developing the library.

Research into the best practices and standards were carried out. As the parliament library was in a special library category internationally as well, giving specific services to parliamentarians and staff, different parliament libraries in Europe, Asia, and North America were researched as to how services were given. As some parliament libraries were open to the public and others limited to parliamentarians and staff the best fit model for Maldives. IFLA, IPU standards were delved into. Based on these plans were laid out to including immediate actions for the opening of the library and a draft strategic plan.

At the initial stage it was decided to give services to parliamentarian and staff. As such when the library opened, the general public can now get access to the library catalogue, and can access through the digital archive to older documents, and staff attends to reference inquiries through connecting by email/phone etc. The customer base was further identified as researchers, students, curious persons etc. The opening hours were also defined. Book donations were opened as well.

It was seen as an imperative to provide relevant and accurate information to the work being done in committees and other related areas.

The current Covid crisis has shown the challenges as well as the importance of access to digital information to stakeholders.

Target to Open the library and digital archive

The existing library collection was moved from the old location within four weeks on weekends as we did not want to cause any disruption when meetings were being held on weekdays. A stock audit was carried out and, in the process, new items were acquired and processed. As it was during the COVID crisis wearing masks and social distancing was always adhered to. Yet, each of the three staff active in this work had to be quarantined for two weeks each due to external contacts.

The library physical collections were divided into four main areas.

- General: collection covering foreign material mostly in the social sciences
- Maldives: collection about and from Maldives

- Reference: collection consisting of materials about other parliament's standards and procedures.
- Special: collection further divided into four main areas which are; Parliament, Executive, Judiciary, and Independent specifically related to the institutions within these areas.

Some of the collections have in addition to books, magazines and other formats. It also has material in both the local language Dhivehi and English.

In the process Koha Library management software was used to implement the library OPAC. It was decided to assign a QR code to each item in order for easy sharing of information by users. Since the library and archive had one staff each, we were very lucky and most thankful to get the help of staff from other departments of People's Majlis such as Foreign Relations, Members Service and Protocol, Hansard and Media in the variety of work. In addition, three keen volunteer librarians from other libraries helped in the cataloguing process. The physical space was also furnished and developed during this stage. It was very exciting and tiring time.

Concurrently, the development of the digital archive was on going. This involved fine tuning D-space software for adding the scanned documents and improving usability and accessibility.

The following communities were developed within the software:

- documents related to the main work of People's Majlis (bills, committee reports, committee minutes, Q&A to ministers, hansard documents, resolutions)
- Presidential speeches and answers to these
- Administrative documents
- Photo, audio and video
- Government budget
- Historical documents
- Documents related to the main work of the Special Majlis.

Items to these collections are being added on an ongoing basis.

Our target is to make usability and accessibility a priority and prioritize proactive disclosure of information from the Majlis. We hope to use data analytics and show trends and interesting facts of the Majlis in the near future. The Library of Peoples Majlis also became members of IFLA and APLAP during this period.

The library and digital archive received a grand opening on the 4th of February 2021 by His Excellency President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih during the first opening of the parliament for the year.

Challenges

With the target of the opening of the library achieved, without losing momentum the strategic plan was revisited to focus on the new tasks ahead. In looking at this the key challenges to the current library was also looked at. These are:

- The amount of data to be researched, organized, digitized and accessed starting from 1932
- Lack of communication, best practices and standards
- Data silos within the organization and society

5 key strands / strategic priorities

The strategic plan envisions to be exemplary in providing impartial and relevant information to cater for the information needs of Parliamentarians and a mission to develop and maintain a relevant collection with a special focus on the social sciences and provide a reference and research service which is efficient and effective focusing on the information needs of parliamentarians and the secretariat.

In order to move forward the strategic plan focuses on 5 key strands/ strategic objectives. These are:

1. Developing the structure, policies, procedures, and tools for information sharing and use
2. Developing and maintain a relevant physical and digital collection
3. Delivering high quality library and research services additionally increasing digital access and services
4. Supporting the Parliament's engagement with the community by creating and enhancing outreach activities.
5. Collaborating and sharing best practices with stakeholders to develop a community of practice and achieve overall objectives

Strategic Objective 1: Developing the structure, policies, procedures, and tools for information sharing and use.	
STATUS	TO DO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vision, mission developed and key objectives and actions identified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Archive and records management policy ▪ Code of ethics policy ▪ Collection and management policy ▪ Maintenance policy ▪ Data management policy ▪ ICT policy ▪ Media policy ▪ Reference and research service policy ▪ Software and website policy ▪ User education policy ▪ Define knowledge structures (SKOS)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Restructure and automate internal workflow processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Utilize Microsoft office365 software within Library and Archives section ▪ Conduct an Information audit of the Majlis secretariat ▪ Aid in the information flow of table office ▪ Aid in the information flow of committee section

Strategic Objective 2: Developing and maintaining a relevant physical and digital collection	
STATUS	TO DO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Library physical collection of 3000+ books, magazines and journals. ▪ Archive physical collection of est. 6688+ documents and 10000 photos. ▪ Digital collection currently includes 1357 digital objects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop Library collection (print and digital) ▪ Develop Digital Archive collection ▪ Preserving and conserving original books ▪ Resource sharing with stakeholders ▪ Create databases and datasets (Members, Subject experts, Constituencies, , Vote results datasets, MPs Attendance datasets).

Strategic Objective 3: Delivering high quality library and research services by increasing digital access and services	
STATUS	TO DO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reference services, photocopying services and internet services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Capacity building of staff ▪ Develop subject briefings for parliamentarians. ▪ Library and Archive orientation and user education for parliamentarians and staff ▪ Research bursaries for students ▪ Update and maintain the library website, digital archive and catalog website

Strategic Objective 4: Supporting the Parliament’s engagement with the community by creating and enhancing outreach activities.

STATUS	TO DO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research ▪ Institutions identified so far (two main government universities, National Library, National Archives, Dhivehi Academy, National Bureau of Statistics, National Center for Information Technology, Television Maldives, Voice of Maldives, Information Commissioners Office, Male City Council) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collaborate and carry out consultations with data and information intensive organizations ▪ Develop physical and online displays and exhibitions ▪ Celebrate special days with book talks/workshops/discussions/Screening documentaries from subject experts, NGO’s, Think tanks etc. in collaboration with media section

Strategic Objective 5: Collaborate and share best practices with stakeholders to develop a community of practice and achieve overall objective	
STATUS	TO DO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research ▪ (Individuals to be highlighted in the institutions identified in Strategic objective 4.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop expertise sharing communities of practice ▪ Identify and list experts in the field. ▪ Identify parliaments and associations to connect ▪ Connect and work with parliaments and associations in other countries ▪ Share technical resources (including equipment's) and expertise ▪ Research, enhance and provide support for developing Thaana OCR through 3rd parties ▪ Develop new tools for the public (biographies etc.)

Way forward

Initiating and developing a parliamentary library service during a pandemic with limited staff proved to be quite a challenge. From the initial set up till the opening lots of lessons were learnt. We hope to be able to achieve most of the actions identified during the remaining 3-year period.

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