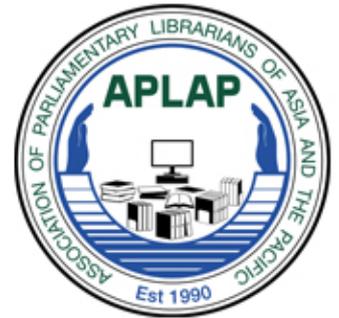


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***Enhancing the Responsiveness and Relevance
of Parliamentary Library and Research Services
During Times of Crisis***

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Country Report for APLAP 2021: Enhancing the responsiveness and relevance of parliamentary library and research services during times of crisis

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Abstract

The National Diet Library (NDL) was established by the National Diet Library Law, which defined the NDL's primary objective as providing assistance to members of the National Diet (Parliament) of Japan by performing research necessary to legislative activities.

The NDL's Research and Legislative Reference Bureau (Research Bureau) has been driven by the necessity to carry out legislative research services under the COVID-19 crisis with appropriate adjustments to the situation. Some staff shifted to teleworking, but remote working for legislative research had difficulties concerning access to the research materials.

We could say that the tasks of the Research Bureau did not change in this pandemic. We have needed to concentrate efforts in responding to research requests, particularly to ones concerning the crisis. Moreover, we have published many research papers relating to the pandemic, which are provided not only to Diet members but also to the general public on the NDL website.

As an innovative element in the measures taken by the Bureau, the introduction of online policy seminars could be noted. In the initial planning for these online seminars, there were some skeptical opinions from research staff, especially about the possibility of discussion with the Diet members in the seminar. But nowadays it can be evaluated that many seminars were successful, accompanied by animated discussion, and with a tendency for the number of Diet members who attend the seminars to increase. In the future, taking fresh insight from the experiences of COVID-19 will be essential.

1 Introduction

The National Diet Library (NDL) was established with the enactment of the National Diet Library Law in 1948, as a legislative support organization for assisting the activities of members of the National Diet (Parliament) of Japan. Its main objective is to provide research and information services as well as to deliver appropriate analysis and information about national political issues. As both the parliamentary and the national library of Japan, the NDL collects books and other library materials, with which it provides a variety of library services for Diet members as well as for executive and judicial agencies of the national government and for the general public.

The NDL Research and Legislative Reference Bureau specializes in providing legislative research and information services. It offers Diet members comprehensive background materials, authoritative analyses and evaluations, and factual information on a wide range of legislative agendas. Citing the results in FY2019, the Research Bureau responded to 36,400 requests for information and research ("research on demand"), and published 319 reports as legislative analysis and information totalling 4,000 pages. Among the Research Bureau's 190 staff members, 110 are specialists in policy research, while 80 are specialists in information services or members who provide administrative and support

services. The Research Bureau contains 14 divisions and 2 offices, 4 of which are responsible for administrative and information services, and 12 of which provide research services.

The secretariat of APLAP 2021 suggests that the conference theme is “Enhancing the responsiveness and relevance of parliamentary library and research services during times of crisis”. Nowadays the phrase “times of crisis” would inevitably remind us of the huge effects brought by the spread of COVID-19 around the world. In this paper, the development of the situation in Japan as well as measures taken by the Research Bureau to meet the situation is discussed, with some understanding for the future and some challenges with which we are still confronted.

2 General situation and chronological circumstances concerning the spread of COVID-19 in Japan

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Japan in the middle of January 2020, and afterwards the number of cases began to increase rapidly about the end of March. On April 7, 2020, the Japanese government declared a “state of emergency” in the metropolitan area for the first time, under provisions of the Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response, in view of the risk that the rapid spread of COVID-19 could have an enormous impact on people’s lives and the national economy. On April 16, the targeted area of the state of emergency was expanded nationwide.

It was expected that the infection would be contained by thoroughly reducing contact between people with voluntary restraint of non-essential movement. Under the decision of each prefectural governor, libraries, museums, theaters, cinemas, department stores, malls, gyms, shops and services deemed “non-essential” were requested to close their doors. It can be noted, however, that even under the state of emergency, compulsory measures implemented in other countries, such as a “lockdown,” were not taken. The first phase of the state of emergency was gradually lifted considering the situation of each area, and finally came to an end on May 25, 2020.

The number of COVID-19 infections began to increase again in mid-June 2020, especially in the metropolitan area, and reached a peak in the second wave at the beginning of August. However in this wave, the infection decreased by September without the declaration of a state of emergency. The reason could be, for example, that the number of severely ill patients was not so high and that the capacity of medical facilities was maintained.

The next wave of infections in Japan was observed in November 2020 across the country, and the trend rapidly increase the number of patients. On January 8, 2021 a state of emergency was declared for the second time, mainly for the metropolitan area. Measures introduced by prefectural governors on this occasion were more limited than last April, concentrating on requests for restaurants and bars to make their opening hours shorter than usual. The second state of emergency finished for all areas concerned on March 21, 2021, but the next state of emergency started for some metropolitan prefectures on April 25 chiefly due to the propagation of the highly contagious coronavirus variants.

As of June 1, 2021, Japan’s total number of confirmed cases for COVID-19 amounted to 746,713, according to the data from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare.

3 Measures taken by the Japanese Diet in response to COVID-19

The deliberation in the Japanese Diet (the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors) has continued even under the states of emergency. In some cases, measures limiting the number of Diet members who attend committees were taken.

In 2020, the ordinary session (from January 20 to June 17) and the extraordinary sessions (from September 16 to 18 and from October 26 to December 5) were held without any interruptions. The latest ordinary session started on January 18, 2021 and is still sitting.

4 Situation of staff in the Research Bureau under measures against COVID-19

As already explained, the National Diet Library is both the parliamentary and the national library of Japan. Many staff members are in the NDL, not only those who work for legislative research, but also those responsible for acquisition of materials for national library, bibliographic control, public services, special collections, digital information services and so on. After the declaration of the first state of emergency, the library adopted a new policy to halve the number of staff members working at the office in line with governmental efforts to reduce the number of commuters. The decision meant that many employees strived to shift to teleworking.

For the legislative research staff members, part of their jobs, for example writing reports for Diet members with reference to digital information resources, was suitable for remote working. However, it also seemed that some tasks, for instance the analysis of legislative issues, were hard to perform at home since they need to use a lot of books and articles of periodicals. Therefore in reality, telecommuting by the research staff was limited.

After the first state of emergency was lifted, the working style at the NDL tended towards how it had always been, though the advantages of teleworking are still appreciated as an option under certain circumstances. It should be stressed that the amelioration of the working environment in the office has been pursued in order to keep social distancing.

5 Effects of the spread of COVID-19 on legislative research services

First, as mentioned before, telecommuting staff were confronted with difficulties concerning access to research materials, mainly books and periodicals, because digital information resources available in the teleworking environment were inevitably limited. Moreover, the situation under COVID-19 restricted the possibilities of the team work style of research and that made it more difficult to exert efforts for comprehensive and client-oriented research by information sharing and co-working among several researchers.

With the spread of COVID-19, the Research Bureau introduced the scheme of online briefings for the Diet members, utilizing web conference applications such as Skype, Zoom, and Webex. In situation in which it would be desirable to avoid long face-to-face conversations, online meetings would be welcomed by the Diet members, their staff, and the researchers. However, it should be added that some members have a preference for face-to-face discussion. At present, the Bureau presents options for both online and face-to-face briefings so that the Diet members can choose one.

The coronavirus pandemic has had a general effect of reducing the size of events which include face-to-face contact. In this context, the Research Bureau changed the style of the “International Policy Seminar”. Ordinarily, the Bureau organized this seminar once a year, inviting a guest speaker from abroad. But after the spread of COVID-19, this kind of invitation with a flight to Tokyo became de facto impossible. The Bureau decided to ask a professor of London University College to give a keynote lecture on the role of parliament in U.K. politics, with the Webex Meeting application. The lecture was recorded and a seminar for Diet members named “U.K. Parliamentary Politics in Times of Crisis” was organized using the recorded lecture and comments by a Japanese professor, a Q&A session and discussions. Unfortunately, the seminar for the general public, which is normally held, was given up on this time due to the difficulties of holding a large conference safely.

6 Initiatives for the main tasks of the Research Bureau under the COVID-19 pandemic

It should be stressed that the tasks of the Research Bureau did not change even under the COVID-19 crisis. There are two pillars: research at Diet members' request, and research on national policy issues, mainly publishing reports and research papers.

On the one hand, since January 2020 when the spread of COVID-19 started, the overall number of research requests from Diet members did not increase nor decrease, partly because deliberations at the Diet were held almost normally in this period.

On the other hand, COVID-19 had a huge effect on the content of their requests. Many questions concerning the coronavirus pandemic were delivered to the Bureau, for example: the principle characteristics of this infectious disease, the chronological transition of the spread of COVID-19, and the situations on medical matters, economy, employment, education and so on, including measures for each sphere and their international comparisons. In April 2020, the peak month for requests relating to COVID-19, 30% of total requests were related to this infectious disease. In the months from March to June 2020, and also in January 2021 that was just the beginning of the second state of emergency and also of the ordinary session of the Diet, the percentages of research requests connected with COVID-19 exceeded 15%, which meant a huge concentration of research content. The Research Bureau responds sincerely to these requests, by making briefings to the members, preparing tailor-made reports or delivering some useful materials. We believe that concentrated efforts by the research staff in response to research requests would make some contribution to substantial argument in the Diet.

Regarding research publications, reports and research papers are provided first to Diet members but also to the general public on the NDL website, and the Research Bureau has been preparing and publishing many documents relating to COVID-19.

For *Issue Brief*, compact briefing papers on policy issues, many reports on various themes were prepared, including: "Economic impact of pandemic and fiscal response," "Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic," "An overview of economic measures in major countries around the world," "Grants for SMEs affected by COVID-19 in major countries," "Japan in the post-COVID-19 international order," and "Current status and issues of employment measures during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Also for *Reference*, a monthly magazine which contains policy and legal research on state affairs, some articles were carried, including: "The COVID-19 pandemic and implications for financial stability," "Policy measures taken and the risk of financial crisis," "An essay on restrictions on property rights under article 29 of the Constitution of Japan due to requests and instructions for suspension of business under the Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response," "Deregulation of telehealth during the COVID-19 response in Japan and the United States," and "COVID-19 and the Japanese economy: government response to the impact on households and the business sector."

In addition, for *Foreign Legislation*, a periodical publication which provides Japanese translations of foreign laws, explanations of the background of legislation and compact information on foreign legislative activities, many instances of legislation for each country are reported.

As of May 11, 2021, we have made public 22 papers of *Issue Brief*, 11 articles in *Reference* and 50 articles in *Foreign Legislation* relating to the COVID-19 crisis.

7 Innovative elements and challenges: online policy seminars

Since 2007, the Bureau has organized policy seminars exclusively for Diet members and their staff as well as for each political party and the Secretariats of both Houses of the Diet (except international policy seminars mentioned above, which included sessions for the general public), as a means of publicizing the results of their information products. Policy seminars have been considered one of the most effective measures for directly delivering the results of published research to Diet members and other participants.

Ordinarily a policy seminar lasts one hour, including a short presentation by researchers on their findings and a Q&A session. About 20 seminars are held annually. And so far, all seminars were held face-to-face style.

However, with the condition that social distancing should be completely respected in any meetings with Diet members, it came to be impossible to hold policy seminars in the same way as before. It was natural for us to make the transition to online seminars. Initially some researchers who held those online seminars were a bit skeptical about their effectiveness, especially the possibility of discussions with Diet members and other participants. Though the scheme in which questions and comments are transmitted from participants to presenters with the chat function was introduced, the anxiety that such functions would not be well used by participants remained.

But it seems that all those fears were groundless. In the online policy seminars, many participants, that is, Diet members and their staff, actively used the chat function in order to transmit their questions and comments. The moderators picked up those questions and read them, followed by presenters giving answers or making additional remarks. As a whole, many online seminars were successfully implemented with animated discussion.

The organization of online policy seminars has had additional but very substantial effects. Our space for seminars in the National Diet Library building is located in the next block to the Diet main building and office buildings. It takes about 10 minutes to walk from the main building or offices of each Diet member to attend the policy seminars in person. It seems that this distance made potential participants reluctant to attend the events. With online policy seminars, the situation has dramatically changed: participants no longer need to come to the seminar venue, and just connect to the seminar with applications instead. As a result, after introducing the system of online policy seminars in autumn 2020, the number of Diet members who attend seminars has tended to increase. This is one of “side effects” of the online seminars that was not imagined before.

It is not predictable when the COVID-19 pandemic will end, after vaccination worldwide or any other measures. But naturally, the organization of online policy seminars will continue as appropriate. There could be some kind of hybrid style seminar with participants choosing between attending in person at the seminar venue or online viewing. In-person attendance would have some advantages, for example to maintain face-to-face communication between researchers and other participants. Various styles of holding seminars will be designed after this pandemic.

8 Final remarks

Needless to say, the activities of the parliament are indispensable to tackling crises such as the coronavirus pandemic even if the situation makes their activities very difficult for any reason. It is the same for parliamentary libraries and research services which must respond to the members' need for knowledge and information.

We are still in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, so first it will be exceedingly important for the parliamentary research service to continue to attend to its business, with careful consideration concerning the restraints of this infectious disease. It can be added here that the parliamentary research sections should maintain efforts to investigate the possibility of more client-oriented services.

In the future, it will be necessary for the parliamentary research service to draw lessons from the experiences of the pandemic. These would partly be some kind of concrete ideas for the effectiveness of business continuity plans. Moreover, any fresh insights should be taken for new styles or forms of research services, similar to the prospect of online (or hybrid) policy seminars which was already mentioned.

We would like to add that efforts to accelerate the digitization of materials could be one lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic in the realm of legislative research services of the NDL. It is clear that legislative research as well as general library services have faced many difficulties with many books, periodicals and other materials which are not available remotely during states of emergency. In such context, the expansion of digitization and construction of more digital networking of information have been considered a momentous task of the NDL for the future. Accelerated digitization is now included in the "National Diet Library, Vision 2021-2025: The Digital Shift at the National Diet Library", as one of the seven initiatives on which the vision is based. We believe that the initiative will make significant contributions to better, more useful legislative research.