

**The Dag Hammarskjold Library (DHL) : Role in Bridging the
Information
Gap with particular Reference to The Developing Countries**

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**A. THE DAG HAMMARSKJOLD LIBRARY (DHL) – AN
OVERVIEW**

It is most appropriate that the present Symposium is being organised in order to pay tribute to Dag Hammarskjold who dedicated himself to peace in the world, and to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Dag Hammarskjold Library, which certainly is a legacy of the late Secretary General.

The United Nations Library was given the present name on November 16, 1961 as a Memorial to

He further stated :

'The services of the Library will also be made available as far as feasible to the Specialized Agencies, accredited representatives of mass media of

achieving of national and linguistic coverage, and to represent different points of view.

The Library regularly receives official documents from member and non-member States as well as documents and publications from non-governmental organizations and from intergovernmental organizations outside the United Nations system (e.g. Organization of American States (OAS), Organization for Economic Cooperation for Development (OECD) and Organisation for African Unity (OAU). Some of the specialized collections are : The Woodrow Wilson Collection, which is a unique source of information about the League of Nations and other related subjects; Oral History Collection and the UN Subject (UNX) collection.

A.3 Special Services

Besides the usual lending, inter-library loan and reference services, this Library provides several specialised services such as SDI, and Internet Training. Some of these services are provided by using data-bases and indexes such as **United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS), UNBIS Plus on CD-Rom, United Nations Documents Index, Index to the Proceedings of Major UN Organs.** In addition, access to UNBIS database is made available free of charge through UNBIS-net to every Internet user. UN-I-Que (United Nations-Information-Quest) and ODS are other useful databases which can be accessed through Internet. For UN libraries ODS, which is a full-text data base, is available free of charge but for other libraries including UN Depository Libraries it is subscription based. Subscribers to RLIN can as well access bibliographic records produced by DHL. Subject index is provided by the descriptors from the UNBIS Thesaurus. In addition, special bibliographies are compiled in different subject areas, under Selective Bibliography Series.

A.4 United Nations Depository Libraries

In addition to its functions and services at the UN Headquarters the DHL has a measure of responsibility in making the UN documents accessible to the world at large. Since 1946 the DHL has been doing this through its Depository Library System. At present there are 394 such libraries in 144 countries receiving these materials, with the understanding that their collections will be maintained in good working order and be available to the public free of charge. 15 such Depository Libraries are functions in India to day. United Nations member States, as well as non-members are entitled to one free depository, usually the national library. In addition, the national parliamentary library, if open to public, is also entitled to receive materials free of charge. Other depository libraries pay an annual contribution to receive UN documents. Developing counties pay a significantly smaller amount.

United Nations librarians and information officers are expected to make periodic visits to depository libraries to provide assistance and training in the management of the UN collections. In addition, special training seminars for depository librarians are periodically organized by the DHL and by the Library of the United Nations Office at Geneva.

some of them such as India, Malaysia, Singapore and Nigeria have made commendable progress during the past four decades or so. Still many of them find the progress they have achieved to be less than satisfactory. No doubt their GNP and per capita incomes have increased but the gaps between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' also widened. The problems of poverty and inequality among nations have been and continue to be the topics of much debate and concern among international organizations such as the UN, IMF, World Bank, Asian Development Bank and others and the need for a North-South dialogue is being often emphasized. Some of the areas requiring attention are : need for a change in the industrial systems and transfer of resources, promotion of indigenous industries, development and transfer of appropriate technologies, focus on self reliance as well as technical cooperation among them.

B.2 Role of Information in Development Planning

Development planning, programming and monitoring require the optimal allocation and utilization of the national resources based on reliable forecasts and meaningful decisions. These exercises require timely, reliable, precise and comprehensive data and information about these resources and other priority requirements. Therefore information is not merely an input resource for effective development planning but it is essential to ensure the optimal allocation and utilization of all other resources. Despite the vital character of information vis-a-vis development planning very few development plans in the developing countries have a chapter on 'information', or a separate budget head for it. It is therefore relevant to emphasize that national development plans should give due recognition to an 'Information Sector'

30 countries with over \$2500 per capita income and sharing about 35% of the world's population. The developing which are around 120 in number with less than \$750 per capita income have therefore either to purchase the knowledge and know-how, or alternatively, they have to duplicate and develop such technologies indigenously, certainly at greater cost. The types of items which fall under the former alternative include : books, periodicals, technical reports, patents, specifications, accessing remote data-bases, licencing arrangements, expertise and commodity imports, cumulating to a sizable amount and resulting in an unfavourable outflow of foreign exchange and balance of payment situation. It is estimated that the payments made by the developing countries for technology imports from the developed countries rose from \$1 billion in 1975 to about \$ 8 billion in 1990 and is expected to be round \$ 15 billion in 2001. With regard to the second alternative for developing everything indigenously, most of the less developing countries at their present level and rate of development, might take a few hundred years to reach even the present level of industrialization and wealth producing capacity of the developed countries.

In several situations it has also been noticed that many developing countries do not have information even on less expensive but equally suitable technologies developed in some other developing countries. Therefore, international programmes such as Technical Co-operation among Developing Countries (TCDC) and several others strongly stress the need for these developing countries to widely disseminate and exchange information on their technology developments among themselves, and with others.

B.3 Information Transfer : The Role of Information Technology

Revolutions in communications have often been at the centre of changes in society. Since Gutenberg printed text has become the principal medium of sharing information and knowledge the world over. As early as 1947 the famous historian Arnold Toynbee at a lecture at London University entitled 'The Unification of the World' gave much emphasis on his basic thesis that 'developments in transport and communications have created – or would create, a single planetary society' Fifty years ago that was an unusually farsighted view; the phrase 'global village' still lay a few decades in future; and Marshal McLuhen had yet to herald the dawn of electronic culture. More recent breakthroughs in communication — the telegraph, the telephone, radio, TV, the fax machine, the micro-chip – have brought profound social and economic changes in the present day society. To day new technologies can shuttle vast amounts of information almost anywhere in the world in mere seconds.

The advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) would enable the establishment of whole new societies in cyberspace, linking easily individuals with common interests to share views and interests. These new technologies from e-mail to cellular telephony to teleconferencing let more and more people share knowledge without having to be in the same place. Sharing

information through computers interlinked through telephone lines, such as through INTERNET is fastly becoming common place in industrial countries and is increasing at a good speed in many developing countries as well. To quote Al Gore, former Vice-President of the US, 'Guttenberg's invention which so empowered Jefferson and his colleagues in their fight for democracy, seems to pale before the rise of electronic communication and innovation from the telegraph to television to microprocessor and the emergence of a new computerised world – an information age'.⁽⁶⁾

It is worth pointing out that in many developing countries the use of ICT though growing fairly rapidly, is still quite limited. The governments in these countries must give it a high priority simply because the ICTs hold enormous potentials for them. The new wireless technologies to day extend modern communication into areas that conventional copper wires would have taken decades to reach – if they ever did. People in remote communities the world over can have access to knowledge beyond the dreams of any one even in the industrial countries a quarter century ago.

B.4 Access For All : Role of Library & Information Systems (LIS)

Providing for awareness of and access to the world's information sources, is only one, though a very important one, aspect of modern LIS. 'The right to information' as a fundamental human right, and the growing need that every one, every class of people and every national should have equal access to information, are two important trends which greatly influence the LIS design and operation. Efficient and effective use of information in a system or country also depends a great deal upon the level of development of the infrastructure, which may vary with different sectors within a country and among countries.

C. CHALLENGING FUTURE FOR THE DHL

The UN Secretary General Kofi A. Annan in his policy document entitled '**We the Peoples : The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century**' which was adopted at the Millennium Summit on September 6-8, 2000 has beautifully and comprehensively outlined the framework of action for the United Nations during the future. Among others, he emphasised the need for globalization in which people of the world, both in developing and developed countries be put at the centre of everything done by the UN. To quote :

“The central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people, instead of leaving billions of them behind in squalor’.

In the last chapter entitled '**Renewing the United Nations**' he highlights the necessity of the UN like all other institutions in the world today to fully exploit the great promise of the present day Information Age. To quote :

“The digital revolution has unleashed an precedent wave of technological change. Used responsibly it can greatly improve our chances of defeating poverty and better meeting our other priority objectives. If this is to happen we in the United Nations need to embrace the new technologies more wholeheartedly than we have in the past.”

While discussing the vital importance of bridging the global digital divide, he gives suggestions as to how the Information Revolution can and must benefit the UN itself and ‘radically improve the efficiency of our field operations.’ To further quote him :

“Ten year ago getting information from or to the developing world was costly and time consuming. But today the World Wide Web is changing that. We can now read newspapers on-line from every corner of the world within seconds of their publication. We can find and download information from national government departments, leading overseas research institutions and key non-governmental organizations just as quickly.

This is not all. Increased connectivity also means that every year the vast electronic treasure house of information available on the United Nations web site becomes accessible at no cost to millions more people. The popularity of our web site is extraordinary – it received more than 100 million ‘hits’ last year.

The Internet also make it possible for us to hold interactive electronic conferences ...

He concludes :

‘Finally, we ourselves as an organization must become more effective, efficient and accessible to the world’s people. When we fail, we must be our own most demanding critics. Only by these means we can become a global public trust for all the world’s people’.

C.1 Implications for the DHL

I have felt tempted to quote rather

Library in the real sense with world outreach so as to making the UN documents and publications accessible electronically to a growing number of users, particularly in the developing countries, need to be intensified and expedited.

To reach the world at large the role of the UN Depository Libraries and UN Information Centres is vital. The role of the ICT in these efforts should also require special attention in this direction, particularly so when a vast segment of population in the developing countries is still not receiving the benefits from the present day global information and ICT revolution. The following comments and suggestions are therefore limited only to these two aspects :

C.1.1 UN Library System

C.1.1.1 UN Depository Libraries

As indicated earlier under Section A the DHL has arranged for the distribution of the UN documents and publications to the users around the world through its Depository Libraries system. It is found that at present there are 394 such Libraries in 144 countries : 55 in Africa, 96 in Asia, and Pacific, 18 in Western Asia, 85 in Western Europe, 35 in Eastern Europe, 49 in Latin America and the Carribean, and 56 in North America. The remaining 45 countries should also be encouraged to extend this facility to its people by having such libraries in their respective areas. Certain countries, may be because of factors such as large population, vast geographical area, and educational and research needs have more than one such Depository Libraries. For example, there are 15 such Libraries in India alone.

In the absence of any comprehensive reports about the status of these Libraries it is somewhat difficult to make proper assessment of the role being played by them in the different parts of the world. On the basis of the rather limited available information and my personal experience with some of them I venture to make a few general observations and suggestions about them in this presentation. It is generally found that the collections of these Libraries are housed either in separate room(s) or stacked alongwith other collections of the host library. While some have staff member(s) especially assigned the task to organize these collections and provide service to the users, in many cases certain staff member(s) are given additional responsibility to look after them. In several cases these collections are found to have not been properly classified and catalogued, (may be because of lack of required expertise) and there may not be even proper stacking and reading facilities in some others. At the same time the availability of these documents may not always be properly known to many users. It is therefore suggested that in order to fulfill the mandate to disseminate timely,

D.3 Special Training Programmes/Seminars, etc.

It is learnt that the DHL at present does hold orientation/training programmes/seminars for the persons incharge of these Depository Library(s) and Information Centre(s). The usefulness of such programmes/seminars can hardly be overemphasized because they would keep the staff more up-to-date and thus help improve the efficiency of these libraries and information centres. In addition, it is strongly suggested that in order to provide larger participation such continuing education programmes/seminars for these staff members should be held at the local or regional level as well quite regularly. Schools of Library and Information Science having the required facilities can certainly render useful assistance in this connection at the local/regional level. m

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3. *ibid.* para 5.
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