

# **Role of the United Nations (UN) in developing libraries and the library profession in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

*The United Nations was created in 1945 after the Second World War to maintain international peace and security. The organization promotes sustainable development, maintaining human rights globally. One of the action areas of the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is to support the development of the libraries whereas other UN agencies contribute positively in various other spheres. UNESCO and the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) have a strong partnership and many library policies have been developed as result. Providing information resources, organizing library Conferences and workshops, developing National libraries, providing support to formulate rules for a united bibliographic control, support in using information technology in the library sector are some of the contributions from the UN system globally. Locally, UN provided policy support in developing the National Library Service Board, assisted the public, school, special and academic libraries on request of the government.*

**Keywords:** *Library Development, International Assistance, Library Conferences*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The United Nations (UN), consisting of 51 signatory countries, was created to maintain international peace and security in 1945. World Leaders were of the view that economic, social and cultural wellbeing of the society affects global peace. Hence UN promotes sustainable development while working on peace keeping/ building activities and protecting human rights. The UN family consists of many organizations. Among them the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) focuses on communication and information as one its priorities and consequently plays a significant role in developing libraries and the library profession. Other UN organizations also contribute in uplifting the library sector.

There is a positive and strong relationship between Sri Lanka and the UN since the 1950s. UNESCO, International Labour Organization (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) are the first UN organizations who worked in Sri Lanka (UNESCO/TA/5).

## 1.1 Objective

The main objective of this paper is to explore the support given by the UN for the development of the libraries and the library profession in Sri Lanka through a literature search.

## 1.2 Significance of the study

There are a few articles written on the UN contribution towards the library profession globally. However literature on the UN contribution towards the development of the library sector in Sri Lanka is sparse. The UN is commemorating its 70th Anniversary this year. In addition, 2015 marks the 60th Anniversary of Sri Lanka being a UN member country. Therefore it will be useful for the librarians to have awareness on the support given by the UN towards the library sector in Sri Lanka in order to seek future advice and guidance from the UN Agencies. The realization of the international recognition and support given to the profession will uplift the self image and confidence of fellow librarians.

## 2.0 United Nations

The United Nations is an Intergovernmental organization. The term intergovernmental organization (IGO) refers to an organization created by a treaty, involving two or more nations, to work in good faith, on issues of common interest. The main purposes of IGOs were to create a mechanism for the people to work more successfully together in the areas of peace and security, and also to deal with economic and social questions (Harvard Law School 2015)

The United Nations Charter was compiled by representatives of 50 countries in San Francisco at the United Nations Conference on International Organizations in 1945. UN came into existence on 24th October 1945 when the charter was ratified by many signatories. There are 193 UN member countries today. (UN 2008) According to the UN Charter the purposes of the United Nations are:

“To maintain international peace and security, To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.” (UN 2006)

UN has declared annual days and observances in order to highlight the burning world issues. Accordingly UNESCO has declared 21st March as World Poetry Day, 23rd April as the World Book & Copyright Day and 8th September as International Literacy Day. The dedications are relevant and important to the

libraries. Furthermore, the UN has proclaimed 1990 as the International Literacy year (A/RES/42/104) and 1983 as the World Communications Year (A/RES/36/40).

General Assembly, Security Council, Economic and Social Council, Trusteeship Council, International Court of Justice and the Secretariat are the main organs of the UN. Secretary General is the principal administrative officer. Mr. Ban Ki-Moon of South Korea is the current UN Secretary General. Global issues are discussed and recommendations are given to solve such issues, at the UN meetings and forums. The Specialized Agencies are under the supervision of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The UN main organs, Specialized Agencies (UNESCO, ILO) and the Programmes (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)) and many other UN entities publish various reports on world issues and statistics periodically (Weiss & Daws 2007). They nurture the sea of information and provide resources to the libraries.

UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library is the main UN library, situated at the UN Head Office in New York. It is an institutional member of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). Since 1946, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library has made provision for the distribution of United Nations documents and publications to users around the world through its depository library system. At present, there are more than 365 depository libraries in over 136 countries maintaining United Nations material from the date of designation as depository to the present. The general public can refer the material free of charge at any depository library (UN 1995 -2015). UN Information Centers (UNICs) provide information on the UN and promote its activities in 63 countries. Repository libraries housing UN publications are an integral part of the UNIC offices. UNICs conduct various workshops and seminars for librarians. The workshop on "Creating partnerships with libraries in Asia: Regional Workshop to Promote Knowledge Sharing" was held in Bangkok, Thailand in 2007. Among the issues discussed were transition from traditional document repository libraries to knowledge sharing centers for the 21st century and transforming the relationship the UN maintains with libraries in Asia. (UN 1995 -2015)

UNIC Colombo has been operating in Sri Lanka from 1961. The library periodically distributes UN literature to National, university and special libraries in the country. Through its outreach activities UNIC Colombo provides awareness sessions on the UN to different target groups for example youth, school community, journalists and the general public. In addition UNIC donates translated UN publications to the school libraries. Globally and locally UN supports the libraries and librarians by producing information sources, distributing them worldwide and conducting trainings for the library professionals.

## 2.1 Role of UNESCO

UNESCO was founded on 16 November 1945 and governed by the General Conference and the Executive Board. UNESCO has 195 Members and eight Associate Members. UNESCO's mission is to contribute to the building of a culture of peace, eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, sciences, culture, communication and information (UNESCO 2015).

UNESCO promotes the building of inclusive knowledge societies through international dialogue, frameworks for collaborative action, by creating awareness of the potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for development. Among the priorities of UNESCO are the development of conventional and digital libraries, archives and knowledge repositories, and the training of librarians and archivists. Library seminars sponsored by UNESCO were held in the various developing regions like Africa, the Arab states, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover UNESCO sent library consultants to developing countries to uplift the library sector on request of the governments. (Lor 2002)

## 2.2 UNESCO and IFLA partnership

The UNESCO has been working in cooperation with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) since 1947. The support that UNESCO provided to IFLA was motivated by the conviction that libraries were highly relevant to UNESCO's ideals (Wieder, 1977). Edward J. Carter, the first head of UNESCO's "Libraries Division" saw the functions of UNESCO in respect of libraries as encompassing the development of libraries in developing countries, development of bibliographic services, publication of aids to bibliographic work, and the fostering of international cooperation through aid to international professional associations such as IFLA (Foskett, 1986).

The UNESCO and IFLA partnership has generated two important declarations of principles to the library field. The Public Library Manifesto, adopted in 1994, proclaims UNESCO's belief in the public library as a living force for education, culture and information, and as an essential agent for the fostering of peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women. The School Library Manifesto adopted in 1999, aims to define and advance the role of school libraries and resource centers in enabling students to acquire the learning tools and learning content that allow them to develop their full capacities; to continue to learn throughout their lives; and to make informed decisions. They have led the way for universally accepted norms (UNESCO 2015). The guidelines on School libraries were published in 2002 and revised in 2015 jointly by IFLA and UNESCO. (Barbara, Schultz, Oberg 2015)

UNESCO collaborated with IFLA to streamline the practices of inter library lending, exchange of publications and cataloguing. IFLA Conference in 1954 led the way to a classified cataloguing code. The result was the UNESCO International Conference on national Bibliography and the “The Guidelines for the National Bibliographic Agency and National Bibliography” published by IFLA (Manicavasagar 1969, Matsumoto 1990).

The Convention on the International Exchange of Publications, 1958 was regarded as a significant international landmark in which UNESCO played a leadership role. The signatories to the convention are expected to not to charge on custom duties or other charges on the import publications. (Ekonen, Palaoposki, Vattulainen, 2006). Further a handbook containing guidelines for the international exchange of publications was published. In 1982 the International Congress on Universal Availability of Publications (UAP) organized by IFLA examined the issues of universal access, production and supply, acquiring repositories (IFLA 2003).

Streamlining Cataloguing standards was another priority area, and the International Conference on Cataloguing Principles, held in Paris in 1961 was convened for this purpose. The result was the unified cataloguing code (Wilhite, 2012).

UNESCO has published the common communication format (CCF) as a result of the International Symposium on Bibliographic Exchange Formats held in Sicily in 1978, which is a common method for structuring bibliographic records. The main purpose is to allow free flow of information among different information systems at International level. The structure of the format conformed to the ISO 2709. The format provided a link between the major international exchange formats while taking into consideration the International Standard Book Descriptions (ISBD) developed by IFLA. (Simmon & Hopkins, 1988)

It is visible that UNESCO has a strong partnership with IFLA in formulating policies and concepts for the benefit of the library community.

### **2.3 Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO**

Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) became a UNESCO member in 1949. Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO (SLNCU) is the government arm of implementing UNESCO agenda in the country. The Commission established on 14th November 1949 is under the Ministry of Education. The UNESCO Secretary General is the Chief Executive Officer of the Commission. There are 35 members in the General Assembly, including representatives of relevant ministries and national bodies concerned with UNESCO’s fields of competence. The main thrust areas of the Commission are Education, Science, culture and Communication (Bandara 1972, Sri Lanka UNESCO National Commission nd).

### **3.0 UN and Sri Lankan libraries**

Libraries were established in Sri Lanka from historical times. The first subscription libraries were formed in 1830s under the patronage of the government. They were under the local authorities with no legislation and with minimum coordination. They had minimum required standards and were not organized properly. This was understood by the government and a request was made from UNESCO to assist the library sector. (Kent & Lancour 1970) As a result, a number of UNESCO officials visited Sri Lanka. In August 1960 Mr. Harold V Bonny, UNESCO Library Advisor drew up a library development plan and he had expressed the view that the librarianship was a concept already existing in the country and it was not necessary to bring a model from other countries (Silva 1985). The UN assistance provided to uplift the library sector is a continuous process even today.

#### **3.1 UN contribution towards the establishment of the National Library**

UNESCO globally organized a series of meetings to strengthen the National Library Services during the period 1958-1974. Asian meeting of Experts on the planning of Library Services was held in Colombo in 1967. The UNESCO Meeting was an initiation for establishing a National Library Services Board (NLSB) in Sri Lanka. According to the recommendations of Ms Evelyn J Evans and Mr. Harold Bonny the NLSB was established in 1970 (Amarasiri, 1990). Further UNESCO provided support in planning the National Library by sending consultants from 1974 (Brawne, 1982).

#### **3.2 UN supporting the libraries in Sri Lanka**

The Bonny Report of 1960 recommended a government subsidized public library service. His recommendation was to focus mainly on rural population as they consisted more than half the population. Thus public libraries were supported by the National Library Services Board (Silva 1985 and Amarasiri, 1990). After setting up of the NLSB, a Pilot Project was carried out in Kandy from 1972-1974 to establish public libraries for the rural population. (Panditarathna, 1970)

During the conflict with the terrorist group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for more than 30 years, many public libraries in North and East were destroyed. Jaffna Public library and other public libraries in the area were developed with the support of the UNESCO and other UN agencies after 2002 (Chandrasekar, 2013). Tsunami waves destroyed more than 250 libraries in coastal area in 2004. Soon after the catastrophe, the NLDSB appealed to the international community to support rebuilding the libraries. UNESCO responded immediately and a national committee named Sri Lanka Disaster Management Committee for Library and Information Services and Archives was formed and the NLDSB was the responsible institution for coordinating the activities of the

committee (UNESCO 2005). In 2011, UNESCO partnered with the Sri Lanka Foundation to implement a project titled Empowerment of Libraries for National Development in Sri Lanka. The project's aim was to strengthen public libraries, school libraries and community information centers by conducting eight training workshops for librarians in four provinces. The workshops were attended by almost 500 public and school librarians from the four selected provinces (UNESCO 2013).

UN support has been extended to the Special Library Sector as well. In order to develop the information dissemination in the Science and technology sectors the National Resources Energy and Science Authority (NARESA) has established a Centre to manage and coordinate scientific literature with a grant received by UNDP and administered by UNESO in 1977 (Perera ,1995).

In, 1960 Mr. Allen, an UNESCO expert had recommended to develop the school libraries and to appoint inspectors of the library, as the libraries were in poor condition. Thus the Ministry of Education had allocated Rs.750,000 for development of school libraries. (Kent & Lancour 1970). However Evelyn J A Evans (1969), UNESCO Adviser stated "Ceylon has a multiplicity of libraries, but with little coordination and no centralized planning they have to date, been an ineffective force in the country's educational development." Also The representative of Sri Lanka at the UNESCO/ IFLA first seminar on School libraries in 1981 in Leipzig, GDR commented that major problems faced by Sri Lankan school library sector were limited time, resources and personnel (Patte 1981).By considering the shortcomings, in 90s Ministry of Education has taken an initiative to develop many areas of education including developing school libraries with a grant given by World Bank to "support an activity-based curriculum, and to encourage the reading habit in school and community", by implementing a National School Library Policy. The National Institute of Library and Information Sciences (NILIS) was established within the University of Colombo, primarily to train School Library Resource Centre staff (Wijetunge,2008). The project totaled US\$ 83.4 million, according to the 2006 WB project completion report, with US\$ 5.9 million initially allocated for the library component. (Word Bank 2007)

Open University Library received donation of books from UNDP during 1982. Further, UNESCO promotes the Open Access information resources including the Open Access Journals platform to uplift the information services (UNESCO nd).

It is evident that UNESCO has provided support to the Sri Lankan library sector. The other UN agencies have also given the needed assistance whenever the requirement arose.

### **3.3 UN supports the Information technology in libraries**

Libraries are using ICT in collecting, organizing, storing and disseminating information. Mr. N.U. Yapa (1995) has commented that "Micro CDS/ISIS is

undoubtedly the most significant contribution of UNESCO towards library automation in developing countries". UNESCO developed the Micro CDS/ISIS system by combining UNESCO and ILO computerized documentation systems. It was officially released free of charge to the libraries and Natural Resources Energy & Science Authority of Sri Lanka (NARESA) was given the authority to distribute the software and to provide training to the staff. UN organizations such as ILO, WHO, FAO and UNEP supporting information development projects had accepted ISIS for information system development and supported NARESA in distributing the software. (Yapa, 1995)

#### 4.0 UN and Sri Lankan library profession

Mr. Frank Gardner, UNESCO Expert in Library Services had highlighted the importance of setting up of an organization for the library personnel. Thus Mr. M.J. Perera, Director of Cultural Affairs had summoned a meeting in partnership with UNESCO National Commission in January 1960 to create an organization. The Ceylon Library Association was created in August 1960 consequently (Silva 1985). The first meeting of the Ceylon Library Association was held at the CISIR Auditorium on 28th August 1960. Mr. S. C. Blok, Librarian of the University of Ceylon, was the Founder President of the Association. (CLA 1969) He was supported by a number of librarians who held various positions in the association during the early years. Today Sri Lanka Library Association is serving the library profession with the objective of uplifting the standards of the library sector.

#### 5.0 Conclusion

There is no doubt therefore that the United Nations has supported the library sector and the library profession by providing resources, training, financial support and necessary guidance in creating policies and good practices globally and locally for decades.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect/ represent the views of the United Nations)*

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