ACCESSING ASEAN PUBLICATIONS: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES *

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Abstract: Accessing materials from ASEAN countries has always posed a serious problem to librarians. In the light of this, the three requisites of accessing publications, namely collection development, bibliographic control and information technology are discussed. This article addresses the difficulties encountered by both librarians and researchers as well as provides some suggestions to alleviate them.

Keywords: Collection development
Library information networks
Bibliographic control
ASEAN

Abstrak: Pengaksesan bahan-bahan daripada negara-negara ASEAN kerap menimbulkan masalah kepada para pustakawan. Dalam konteks ini, tiga keperluan untuk mengakses penerbitan iaitu pembangunan koleksi, pengawalan bibliografi dan teknologi maklumat dibincangkan. Di samping membentangkan kesukaran yang dihadapi oleh pihak pustakawan dan penyelidik, artikel ini turut memberikan beberapa cadangan untuk menanganinya.

Katakunci: Pembangunan koleksi
Rangkaian maklumat perpustakaan
Kawalan bibliografi
ASEAN

KANDUNGAN/*CONTENTS*

1. INTRODUCTION

ASEAN as a regional grouping was founded in Bangkok in 1967. The last 29 years have seen ASEAN grow from strength to strength, proving that political, economic, social and cultural differences can be resolved in the spirit of "consensus, equality and mutual benefit"[1] — the 'tenets' within which ASEAN operates. Recent reports[2] of its continued

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political and economic growth bear testimony to the success of regional cooperation and shown the world that unity can exist within diversity.[3]

To ensure ASEAN's continued success as it approaches the 21st century, all countries within ASEAN and all parties/agencies within each country must play their role to the best of their ability — and not least, libraries. The need for published and unpublished data for their various programmes and projects will be more urgent as ASEAN countries become more developed and economic competition within ASEAN and between ASEAN and other regions becomes more intense. The sharing of information among ASEAN countries too will become more urgent as ASEAN's political, social and cultural integration becomes more tangible. It is in these spheres of activities that libraries can play a role.

As information centres, libraries are in the position to contribute effectively to this multi-faceted growth and development of ASEAN. But the effectiveness of this role lies in the libraries' ability to capitalise on what they do best, which are essentially in three areas - collection development, bibliographic control and information technology.

However, the question that begs to be asked is - are the libraries in the region able to meet the challenges of ASEAN in the 21st century? Can we truly function as information centres as we claim to be? Can we perform our role as information centres from a position of strength with the capability to provide information that can meet regional needs?

Not from what have been discussed at the last Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians in May 1996 (CONSAL X). Issues that kept cropping up in working papers and at discussions were (i) the lack of information about Southeast Asia emanating from Southeast Asia and (ii) the need to develop regional information networking. With regard to (i), publications from Southeast Asian countries are too few and far in between and many that are available are difficult to access. With regard to (ii), there is a need to develop indigenous knowledge databases at the national as well as regional levels for information-sharing. These issues seem to be the current concern of not only Southeast Asian librarians but also of custodians of Southeast Asian collections in libraries overseas. In fact, as a result of all the deliberations, one of the three action plans that CONSAL X endorsed at the end of the Congress was the setting up of a regional bibliographical network called SEANet. This endorsement reflects the willingness on the part of Southeast Asian librarians to forge greater regional cooperation in information-sharing. These issues however are not new issues. The difficulty of getting information and acquiring materials on Southeast Asia has long been a problem. The late Professor John M. Echols[4] listed seventeen problems encountered in the acquisition of Southeast Asian materials while more recently Ch'ng Kim See (in her paper presented at CONSAL X) spoke of almost as many issues that hamper effective information-sharing through networking. In between, throughout the 1980's and 1990's, many others from USA, UK, Australia and others have highlighted the problems.

This paper will not belabour these issues but will instead focus on one aspect -- Accessing ASEAN publications: issues and challenges. In a way, we are going back to basic issues in information-sharing because in discussing access to publications, we shall be focussing on three requisites to accessing publications - namely collection development, bibliographical control and using technology to facilitate access. In order for us to understand the issues better and with greater depth, my colleague and I administered questionnaires to lecturers/researchers who use ASEAN materials for their work in Malaysia and Singapore, interviewed librarians in-charge of ASEAN collections at libraries in Malaysia and Singapore as well as undertook a fairly comprehensive review of the literature.

Due to constraints of time and post-CONSAL workload, the survey was confined to Malaysia and Singapore. Information on other ASEAN countries were obtained from the literature. We hope however to extend the survey to other ASEAN countries in the immediate future.

2. COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Reponses From Librarians

2.1.1. Legislation

In general, the National Libraries of ASEAN countries acquire locally published materials (print and non-print) via legislation — the Legal Depository Act or its equivalent.

In some countries, the privilege is extended to other libraries, such as university libraries. In the countries governed by the Act, failure to deposit the copies required would incur a penalty, the severity of which varies. In Singapore, a penalty of S$5,000 is imposed on recalcitrant publishers. Despite this provision however, there has been no enforcement of the Act.[5]

2.1.2. Acquisitions Policy

Most libraries in ASEAN have some form of an acquisition policy,

(i) comprehensive coverage of local titles; only titles in English are acquired from foreign sources

(ii) selective on the basis of subject or geographical areas

(iii) tend to collect Southeast Asian materials, rather than ASEAN *per se*

(iv) must be of a certain academic level

(v) strive for comprehensiveness in materials such as postgraduate theses/dissertations, government publications, conference reports, monographs, etc.

(vi) selective policy for journals.

2.1.3. Acquisitions Sources

Most libraries acquire via

(i) local suppliers

(ii) National Library of Australia Regional Office in Jakarta

(iii) exchange programmes with ASEAN and non-ASEAN countries

(iv) field trips

(v) personal contact with counterparts

(vi) resident/visiting research fellows who use/visit libraries.

2.1.4. Reasons for Developing Southeast Asian/ASEAN collections

(i) for teaching and research

(ii) to develop regional collections

(iii) to develop local collections.

2.1.5. Problems in Acquisitions

The problems can be summarised as

(i) lack of acquisition tools, such as BIP

(ii) irregularity of publications

(iii) local suppliers reluctant to go to countries of origin to acquire materials

(iv) exchange mechanisms unsatisfactory because only duplicate titles are exchanged

(v) political issues affect acquisition in that although titles are available, they are inaccessible because they have been banned

(vi) inability to understand vernacular scripts/languages.

2.2. Responses from Researchers / Lecturers

2.2.1. Use of Asean Publications for Research/Teaching

The majority of those involved in research/teaching do refer to ASEAN publications for their work.

2.2.2. ASEAN Countries Relevant to Research/Teaching

The majority of the users in Malaysia and Singapore are particularly interested in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, followed by Vietnam and then Brunei and Philippines. The responses suggest a parochial approach to research.

2.2.3. Difficulty in Obtaining/Sources of Supply

The majority have no problems obtaining the publications and they obtain them from their institutional libraries. Some do make use of other local libraries. Very few obtain them from foreign libraries.

2.2.4. Problems of Access

For the few who find it difficult to obtain ASEAN publications, the reasons are given as:

(i) not available in institutional, local and foreign libraries

(ii) inadequate bibliographical access via published listings and electronic databases

(iii) difficult to obtain latest statistical information, official statements, government publications, etc.

2.2.5. Accessing Records of Collections

The majority of users do access the bibliographic records of ASEAN and non-ASEAN libraries, mainly through their institutional libraries or independently through INTERNET.

Others depend on personal contact when visiting countries or on conference trips.

2.2.6. Borrowing Publications From Other ASEAN/Non-ASEAN Libraries

The majority of users do not borrow from other ASEAN or Non-ASEAN libraries. Their main source is the institutional library.

2.3. Issues and Challenges

Although the respondents interviewed are from Malaysia and Singapore, the literature reviewed suggest the same is true of other ASEAN countries. Feedback from CONSAL X have also been taken into consideration as added information.

With regards to acquisitions, the findings indicate certain weaknesses in the acquisitions systems and procedures, namely:

(i) The acquisition of ASEAN materials is not a priority, the priority being local publications.

(ii) There is no systematic method of acquiring ASEAN materials.

(iii) There is no evaluation measures applied to collection development of ASEAN materials.

(iv) The parties involved in the collection development systems (librarians, publishers, booksuppliers) have no common objectives, namely a commercial relationship.

If the acquisitions systems and procedures at the country level are weak, what chance is there for regional efforts?

However, confident in the belief that a commitment to ASEAN's growth would provide the incentive, we would like to suggest, with the lessons learnt from our local experience, the following:

(a) That publishers and representatives from national publishing agencies, booksellers and librarians from each ASEAN country meet and discuss the possibility of developing a national database that contains information on books published in the country and about the country.

The information should include titles, prices, names of agencies that stock the titles, etc.

The software used should take into account the possibility of networking with the other ASEAN countries so as to form an ASEAN Books-In-Publication Database. It would help if a brief description of the item could be included and a bonus if the CIP details could be provided. However, the CIP must adhere to international standards.

This regional database would be invaluable to librarians. For example, in the case of prices, librarians from the ASEAN countries would know the price quoted for the region and compare prices with their counterparts. The outrageous prices that Malaysian librarians used to pay for their materials which come via Singapore is a case in point.

(b) Another cooperative venture that would benefit ASEAN is the establishment of a Regional Clearinghouse for Translations and Copyright.

Each country could translate at least 10 titles a year from the vernacular to English and in this way provide a ready supply of a minimum of 70 titles a year for the ASEAN market. The Clearinghouse should also arrange for the 70 titles to have copyright and in so doing, facilitate access to the ASEAN publications.

(c) Although now and then libraries do undertake some evaluation of their collections, collection evaluation is not a common practice in the ASEAN region. Now that some library acquisition softwares are Conspectus-based, ASEAN countries should look into adopting a similar system as a tool for evaluating institutional, national and regional collections. It allows for a systematic development and evaluation of collections and apart from being an economical measure, would help to foster regional cooperation. The RLG Conspectus methodology was initiated by USA and adopted/adapted by United Kingdom and Australia and other countries over the last two decades. Not all librarians are enamoured by the RLG Conspectus. The literature provides both the advantages and disadvantages of implementing CONSPECTUS but the principles inherent in the methodology are worth discussing at the national and ASEAN levels.

(d) When all systems are in place - the collection developed systematically, all bibliographical standards imposed and adhered to, the technical infrastructure installed, the databases operating - it is time to test regional cooperation by borrowing an item. The weakness in libraries sometimes is that, despite excellent technology and systems, loans can be hampered by unnecessary library bureaucracy.

In the interest of ASEAN research and scholarship, there should be a Document Delivery Clearinghouse to provide for intra-ASEAN Inter-library loans, problem-free with minimal charges.

This Clearinghouse should be responsible for ensuring all the loans are entertained with speed and accuracy.

Another service that can be handled by the Clearinghouse is to supply photocopies or microprints, at a reasonable price.

An excellent loan and document delivery system should be the hallmark of the ASEAN Document Delivery Clearinghouse

3. BIBLIOGRAPHIC CONTROL

The interviews with the librarians reveal that the bibliographic control of ASEAN publications is fraught with problems. Coupled with problems pertaining to acquisitions, other problems which affect the effective

bibliographic control of these materials are those faced by librarians themselves in the provision of bibliographic records. Top on the list is the problem of cataloguing publications in the indigeneous languages.

3.1. Language Problems

Specific language skills are required and in the absence of such skills, librarians are unable to process the materials. This contributes to the lack of bibliographic control which in turn hampers access. In Australia, to overcome this, a language recognition module was developed in the Library and Information Studies undergraduate course at the University of Canberra. This module is designed to help in the recognition of foreign languages and non-Roman scripts. It is envisaged that this will assist cataloguers in recognising the type of languages the publications are written in and hence help them to make decisions as to how to handle them accordingly or pass them on to appropriate persons who are able to handle them. A committee should be established by ASEAN-COCI to look into this issue and devise a similar model. It would certainly be a great help to ASEAN cataloguers to be able to at least recognise the script and the language-type.

3.2. Lack of Cataloguing-In-Publication (CIP)

Response to questionnaires sent to librarians to highlight problems faced in cataloguing ASEAN materials indicate the lack of CIP in ASEAN publications. CIP will assist librarians in speeding up processing of publications. It is recommended that the national bibliographic agencies in each of the ASEAN countries should provide high quality bibliographic records as CIP for their national imprints. This will facilitate ease of cataloguing for other librarians.

3.3. Standardization and Standards

One of the problems faced by librarians with regards to cataloguing is the absence of standardization of names and subject headings for ASEAN materials.

In the light of the need for standardization in this aspect, we would like to propose that an ASEAN Regional Bibliographic Committee be established to develop bibliographic standards and guidelines for the cataloguing of ASEAN publications by various libraries/agencies within ASEAN. It is suggested that there should be representation from both the national bibliographic agencies as well as major academic libraries from each country in ASEAN. This committee is to discuss cataloguing policies, standardization and standards:

(a) Cataloguing and reference tools
　　To recommend the tools to be used by the various cataloguing agencies.

(b) AACR2 policies and interpretations
　　To decide on the use of AACR2 options by libraries.

(c) Name and subject headings policy
　　To provide name and subject headings authority.

(d) Standards for change and input
　　To provide minimum standards for bibliographic record creation.

(e) Guidelines for change and input

(f) Standards for non-Roman language entries

(g) Provision of training in cataloguing for participating libraries.

If libraries and cataloguing agencies within ASEAN conform to the standards and guidelines as proposed by this Commitee, exchange of information in the region will be greatly enhanced.

As a consequence of all this, we would like to suggest that a regional bibliographic database be developed for ASEAN. It should be a decentralised system, networking a host of national bibliographic databses.

It is also recommended that to facilitate access to information on ASEAN materials, the computerised systems of libraries within ASEAN should adhere to international

standards like Z39.50 which allows a librarian accessing a database on one computer platform to search on OPAC hosted on another computer with a totally different database structure.

4. IT AND NETWORKING

This issue has been discussed so frequently and at great length at previous conferences, including library networking for Southeast Asia.

At CONSAL X in May 1996, four papers were presented representing various aspects of IT in Southeast Asia,

(i) the telecommunication infrastructure [6]

(ii) the development of a specific database [7]

(iii) the development of a regional database [8], and

(iv) Internet in Southeast Asia [9].

The creation and development of SEANet suggested at CONSAL X is of particular interest. The proposal to develop the ASEAN Bibliographic Database must complement SEANet.

What needs to be said here however is that too much emphasis has been placed on the technical aspects of IT that libraries tend to forget that IT is merely the means to an end . Regionally, IT would certainly facilitate networking. There is no way that manual systems can integrate ASEAN into one cooperative region. Having said that however, librarians must realise that the IT infrastructure is to facilitate the creation and development of the various databases proposed.

5. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

5.1. ASEAN Books-in-Publication Database

To be developed by the publishers and booksellers, listing titles of books and journals, audio visual, etc., prices, description of book, names of agents/suppliers, etc.

5.2. ASEAN Regional Bibliographic Database

Contains bibliographic details of books, journals, audio-visual, etc. in libraries' holdings. Covers precise information on what each library has acquired or where to locate an item.

5.3. ASEAN Conspectus

Indicates generally the nature of the libraries' collections and collection development policies. It can show the strength of each library's collection on the basis of subject areas or geographical areas.

5.4. ASEAN Document Delivery Clearinghouse

A regional inter-library loan agency, including document supply (e.g. photocopy, microprints, etc.)

5.5. Regional Clearinghouse for Translations and Copyright

An agency for the translation of selected titles, from the vernacular to English, for the ASEAN market.

6. CONCLUSION

The ASEAN libraries have discussed regional cooperation for many years and except for the National Libraries, other libraries have not

been involved in cooperative projects with their ASEAN counterparts. All libraries in the country should be mobilised in order to facilitate regional cooperation. The National Libraries cannot be shouldering the responsibility alone.

If the same environment persists, none of what has been proposed can materialise.

Whether or not these proposals can materialise ultimately depends on the political will of ASEAN-COCI members. The priority of ASEAN-COCI should be to establish two committees,

(i) one committee to discuss which of the proposals mooted at this conference is practical and 'realisable', and

(ii) another committee (the Regional Bibliographic Committee) to discuss and decide on the bibliographic standards.

These Committees should then plan the strategies and mobilise the libraries concerned. The Regional Bibliographic Committee should be able to start on their tasks immediately.

ASEAN-COCI need not undertake too many projects - even one will suffice but at least ensure that this Project will be operating in 5 years.

We would suggest that the ASEAN Regional Bibliographic Database be given priority in tandem with SEANet because of the complementary nature of the projects.

NOTES

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