

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

Prof. P.B. Mangla*

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 the late Dag Hammarskjold, UN Secretary General, who was killed in an aircraft crash on September 17, 1961. It certainly was a befitting tribute to a great human being, a poet, philosopher and a mystic. He had all the attributes of a **Karamayogi** as given in **Bhagavad Gita**, a well-known Hindu scripture. He had extensive interests as a bibliophile who knew so well both the wisdom and beauty to be found in the printed page.

To quote Henry P. van Dusen, his biographer :–

‘There was a peculiar appropriateness in the fact that Hammarskjold’s last legacy to the United Nations was a scheme for a great Library, made possible by the generosity of the Ford Foundation. Hammarskjold himself not only conceived the idea but personally supervised almost every detail of the planning. As there was special appropriateness that Dag Hammarskjold’s final contribution to the United Nations should have been a Library, so it was no less fitting that the United Nations’ principal memorial to him should have taken the form of naming of the Library in his honour. ⁽¹⁾

A.1 Functions

The policy of the Library as mentioned in the Report to the Fifth (Budgetary) Committee in 1949 was partly outlined by the then Secretary General as follows :

‘The Library’s function is to enable the delegations, Secretariat and other official groups of the Organisation, obtain with the greatest possible speed, convenience and economy, the library materials and information needed in the execution of their duties. The materials to be assembled and the services to be maintained will be determined by the needs of these Groups’.⁽²⁾

* *Ex. Head., Department of Library & Information Science, and Dean, Faculty of Arts, 19/4 Cavalry Lines, Delhi University Campus, Delhi-110007 (India)*

** *Text of this paper to be used for presentation in the Symposium.*

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 information, international organisations, affiliated non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, scholars and writers. No one needing to use full sets of documents and publications of the League of Nations, the United Nations or the Specialized Agencies will be denied access. Services to the public must necessarily be subordinated to the services needed by the United Nations’.⁽³⁾

It is found that the above mentioned statement of policy remains in effect to this day, may be only with minor modifications and extensions through administrative orders issued by the Secretary General from time to time.

This Library has today developed into an internationally known research and information centre. It is pertinent to mention that over the years the Library has been able to keep pace with the increasing demand placed upon it on account of the growth in membership of the United Nations and by the proliferations of programmes and activities authorised by its legislative Organs. In addition, developments such as the need for coordination with other libraries falling within the ambit of the United Nations and its Specialized Agencies and increasing demand for information from the developing countries have greatly widened the scope of its responsibility and services.

The details available on its well designed Website are useful about various aspects such as its collections, services, computerised data-bases and indexes to UN documents. Some of this information is summarised here for ready reference :

A.2 Collections

Besides the complete collections of the League of Nations, the U.N. documents and publications, and comprehensive coverage of Specialized Agencies materials its collections represent the Library’s commitment to acquire current materials which in Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold’s words ‘relate to the broad scope of the work of the United Nations’. The Library maintains a sustainable collection of books (about 400,000), newspapers, periodicals (more than 10,000) and maps (more than 80,000) on subjects of concern to the Organization, such as the history of the UN, international relations, international and national law, disarmament, energy, economics and social developments. In addition, it has more than 12000 reference works, bibliographical sources, texts of constitutions and other legislative instruments, most of them being in electronic form. It has a strong collection of official and statistical publications from most countries and other organizations. These materials are collected with the aim 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.

A.5 United Nations Information Centres

Informing media, government institutions, NGOs, academia and the general public about the work of the United Nations is the key function of the UN Information Centres. This worldwide network is vital to the Organization's efforts to promote an understanding of and support for the goals and objectives of the UN through collections of UN documents and other publications (both print and non print) and their services. In 1947 first such Information Centres were established in 10 countries including India. It is learnt that presently 70 such Information Centres are functioning in different countries of the world.

B. INFORMATION GAP FROM DEVELOPING COUNTRIES' PERSPECTIVE — A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Before discussing the role that the DHL should play in bridging the information gap between the developing and developed countries it would be relevant to have an overall view of the scenario in the developing countries in this regard.

B.1 Developing Countries : General Characteristics

The 'developing countries' are so called because, generally speaking, they have real income and capital per head of population which are low by the standards of North America, Western Europe, Japan and Australia. A few common characteristics of these countries are : low literacy rate, agricultural rather the industrial based economy, limited availability of the indigenous capital, shortage of technical and professional manpower for development, poor public health facilities, shortage of drinking water and poor internal communications.

As generally used, the term covers major part of Asia (exception being Japan and possibly a few South East Asian countries), Africa, South America and parts of Eastern and Southern Europe. They are more than 120 in number, comprise almost 60% of the earth's surface and provide home to about 70% of the human race, more than 2800 million people. There is a vast diversity among their political system and demographic situations. Most of these countries attained political independence after World War II and each of them has a rich history, personality and internal problems.

These developing countries are at very different stages and with very different development potentials. Several of them embarked upon programmes of socio-economic development and reconstruction after attaining independence and

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 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' as they do to other sectors of economy such as agriculture, industry, education and research, science & technology, trade and culture. Such a recognition would undoubtedly provide a better perspective of the premise that 'the level of information handling capability is a socio-economic development indicator' in a country.

It may be added here that economic growth is essentially the increase in the available stock of useful knowledge and its accessibility to others. As early as 1969 in a discussion on alternative forms of international cooperation Nobel Laureate Jan Tinbergen⁽⁴⁾ pointed out that 'information' and 'information exchange' were among the main elements respectively in the 'objects' category and 'activities' category in such cooperation. In this context the issue raised by Kenneth Arrow, yet another Nobel laureate is really significant when he says, 'if one nation or class has the knowledge which enable it to achieve higher productivity why are others not acquiring that information ...' ⁽⁵⁾ It is certain that the cost of information transfer is an important inhibiting factor influencing the world wide diffusion of technological know how.

It is estimated that 90% of the capacity for generating, communicating, and utilizing information and knowledge especially in science & technology rests with a small number of technologically and industrially advanced countries, say about

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 with in 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 extensively from this important document because it provides clear cues for the development of DHL infuture. Among the several areas requiring attention of the DHL the two which have significant implications for it are : (i) the urgent need to create a civil society in the world by keeping people, governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations well informed, and (ii) to make optimal utilization of the ICT in information transfer and global information networks.

I need hardly reiterate here that the DHL which operates as a part of the Department of Public Information of the UN is really a modern research Library serving its clientele in the most effective and efficient manner. An overview of the Library is already given under section A above. The efforts to make it a Virtual

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, comprehensive, balanced and reliable information through print, audio-visual and Internet media to all, these Libraries, particularly those in the developing countries, must take concrete steps so as to function in an efficient and effective

manner. Some of the recommendations for the Member State/ host libraries, wherever applicable, may be as follows :

- (i) To give wide publicity about the availability of these documents and publications (both in print and non-print forms) through various means such as local press, electronic media, library bulletins, brochures, lectures, seminars, exhibitions, etc.;
- (ii) To ensure their proper organisation (classification, cataloguing, indexing, etc.), and shelving in separate room(s) with proper reading facilities;
- (iii) To assign exclusive responsibility to competent staff member(s) with high academic and professional qualifications and knowledge about the functioning of the UN, its Organs, and other Specialized Agencies, to organise, administer and provide services to users. Besides the usual reference service, the concerned staff members must scan through these documents regularly, do indexing and even repackaging of information in topics of local and national interests so as to help reducing the existing information gaps for technological and socio-economic development; and
- (iv) To take appropriate steps for getting the documents of general interest translated into local language(s) for their wider use and understanding. Since these documents are in the language(s) of the United Nations they are not easily usable by many of these users. The removal of the language barrier should certainly be given a high priority for their wider use.

C.1.1.2 UN Information Centres

It is learnt that the need for these Centres was recognised from the very inception of the UN. For example, the Centre in India, which at present looks after India and Bhutan, was established as early as 1947. Such Centres are in operation in 70 countries to look after the requirements of all the Member States numbering about 189 today. They are 25 in Africa, 13 in the Americas, 16 in Asia and Pacific, and 16 in Europe. Like the Depository Libraries these Centres are also expected to play a significant role in disseminating information about the UN and its various Organs to the people in the world, particularly in the developing countries, and in areas of economic and social development. Usually called as the 'Field Voice' of the UN they function as part of the UN Office in the country concerned and are expected to promote public awareness and mobilize public support for the work of the United Nations at the local level. They usually have large collections of the UN, its Specialized Agencies and several international organisations (both in print and non-print forms). Since they are administered directly by the United Nations they are expected to be well organised, well administered and provide services efficiently. However the level of their functioning certainly varies from country to country and at several places much needs to be done about the document organization (classification, cataloguing and indexing) and services. Most of the

recommendations, if not all, as given above for the Depository Libraries may therefore be applicable to them as well. Also, it is emphasised that more such Centres should be started in several other Member States so as to spread the UN message with better local touch.

C.1.1.3 Organizational Setup at the Member States Level

As indicated earlier, the situation about the Depository Libraries and/or UN Information Centres varies from one Member State to another. In the case of the Member States having both the Depository Library(s) and Information Centre there seems to be an urgent need to develop a system of cooperation and coordination among them. In such a system the Information Centre should function at the apex and the Depository Library(s) should be closely interlinked with it. In other words, the Information Centre should serve as a liaison between the DHL and the Depository Library(s) in a Member State for various administrative and professional matters. It is learnt that some such liaison system is supposed to be in operation as per the present practice but this however needs to be implemented more rigorously. (This recommendation presumes that at present each Information Centre looks after the work in one or more Member States thereby covering all the 189 UN members countries).

C.1.2 Use of Information Technology

In the light of the discussion given above it is sufficient to emphasise here that the ICT must be used to the optimal extent in organising document collections and making them accessible to the people at large, with particularly reference to the developing countries, wherein the use of the IT is yet to be available to many. The UN Web Site, DHL data bases (Indexes, documentation and bibliographies) and other services should be easily accessible to them through the UN Library System in these Member States.

D. CERTAIN OTHER SUGGESTIONS

D.1 Expansion of the DHL Website

The present Website needs to be further expanded in coverage and access by providing information on different subjects such as Human Rights, Violence, and HIV/AIDS. It would be more useful if data bases such as ODS and UN Treaty Data-Base are made accessible to all free of charges.

D.2 Need for Coordination with the Libraries of other UN Agencies

In countries where besides the UN Depository Libraries and the UN Information Centres, libraries of various other agencies such as UNESCO, and WHO, also exist it is essential that they must be made part of the proposed UN Library System. This suggestions is being made because it is noticed that hardly any such cooperation and co-ordination exists at present.

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.

D.4 Research Projects

The DHL should take steps to sponsor research projects so as to study various topics such as the use of the UN documents and services, impact of these services on people, etc. in different Member States/regions. Undoubtedly such studies would provide greater insight about the situations which would help a great deal for future action plans and development. Details in this regard can be worked out on the basis of the interest to be indicated by the DHL. Such studies may be done by qualified persons preferably located in the country or the region concerned.

E. CONCLUSION

It may be reiterated that there certainly is a greater need for information transfer for proper socio-economic development, particularly in the developing countries. If planned well this would be a positive step in the direction of reducing the existing imbalance between the North and South countries. The commendable work being done by the UN, its Organs and the Specialized Agencies would go a long way in this direction. The DHL can and should continue playing a prominent role in this regard. The future slogan should be **‘Global Vision-Local Touch’** for the DHL. It would be relevant to mention here that while the countries at large should understand each other better and develop closer cooperation in all walks of human activity, be it economics, commerce, politics, education and research, each nation should at the same time retain its individual identity, thus making the whole world a Global Village with diversity but still with connectivity. To conclude I am tempted to quote Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian leader, who aptly echoed such a viewpoint when he said :

“I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any of them’.

REFERENCE :

1. Van Dusen, Henry, P. Dag Hammarskjold : The statesman and his faith, 1967, p. 118.
2. United Nations. Library Policy and Organisation, General Assembly, 4th Session, Fifth Committee, September 21, 1949 (Memo), A/C. 5/298, para 4.
3. *ibid.* para 5.
4. Tinbergen, J. International relations-Alternative forms of international co-operation, *Int. Soc.Sc. J.*, 30 : 223-37; 1978.
5. Arrow, Kenneth. Classificatory notes on the production and transmission of technological knowledge, *Am. Econ. Rev., Papers and Proceedings*, 52 : May 29-35; 1969.
6. Gore, Al. Infrastructure for the global village, *Scientific American*, 265 : 150-3; 1991.1