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Developing a Dynamic Korean Public Library Network System

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Abstract

Over the last decade there have been continuous efforts of developing cooperative public library network systems in Korea. As a main headquarter library of Korea, the National Library of Korea has functioned as a vital part of planning, coordinating, and implementing the network systems. However, with the rapid growth of information and technological changes in the 21st century society, there have been some discussions and reservations about the effectiveness of the current system. First, the centralized network structure does not effectively function in promptly responding to the local community's changing needs and characteristics. Second, the current library administrative system with different governing institutions for public, school, and academic libraries makes it difficult to build a dynamic cooperative network system. Therefore, it is suggested to develop strategic plans which reflect the changing needs in this information era and eliminate structural, administrative, and political barriers.

Background

Since late 1990s, the National Library of Korea has been trying to develop various public library network systems for library cooperation at both national and regional levels. According to the statistics from *Korean Library Year Book* (2005), there are 487 public libraries in Korea by the end of year 2004, compared with 168 in 1986 and 462 in 2002. Even though the number of public libraries has been growing significantly in recent years as shown in Table 1, when comparing with other countries such as U.K., U.S. and Japan, we are by far short in the number of libraries serving their populations. For example, the total serving populations per Korean public library were 99,000 in 2004, in contrast to 12,000 in U.K., 30,000 in U.S., and 48,000 in Japan. Also the total FTE professional librarian per library was 4.5, which indicates that each librarian needs to serve 22,296 community members. So a major issue in public libraries has been how to develop efficient network systems and programs to support local public libraries in order to solve this problem.

<Table 1> Number of Public Libraries and Serving Populations

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Number of Library	420	437	462	471	487
Serving populations per library	114,000	110,000	104,000	102,000	99,000

Source: Korean Library Year Book, 2005. p.12.

The Korean public library network programs have been operated by the network system consisting of four levels as depicted in <Figure 1>. At the very top level of the system is the National Library of Korea as a main governing institution. At the second level, there are 16 district headquarters libraries, each representing libraries in seven major cities and nine provinces. At the third level, 33 main province libraries represent libraries in eight provinces. Finally at the bottom level are a total of 487 local public libraries.

(Insert Figure 1)

The operating process of the network system works as follows. First, the National Library of Korea develops an annual network plan and sends it to 16 district headquarters libraries. Each district headquarters library then devises its own district level library network plans which would fit the National Library's strategic plan. Then 33 main province libraries build efficient regional network system plans by working with each of their district headquarters libraries. These main province libraries work as facilitators connecting the district headquarters libraries to 487 local public libraries. The local public libraries operate the

cooperative network system in their local area libraries or institutions.

Even though the network system operating structure in <Figure 1> looks very systematic, there are some possible problems in the current network system structure. First, since the master plan for the network system is planned and designed at the National Library level, it does not reflect properly the needs and problems of local public libraries in actual cooperation. Second, since the public library network structure shows the top-down operating structure, it is not only slowing down the communication flows among participating libraries but also making it hard to promptly reflect feedbacks from local community users. Third, in the current centralized and standardized network operating structure, it is not easy for local public libraries to develop various cooperative programs with other local school, academic, or even special libraries for effective local network system development. Fourth, under the current library administrative system with different governing institutions for public, school, and academic libraries makes it difficult to build cooperative network systems (see Figure 2). Moreover, the public library administrative system itself has three different governing institutions as shown in Table 2, which makes it difficult to build effective cooperative network systems among member libraries.

(Insert Figure 2)

<Table 2> Public Libraries Divided by Administrative system

Administration	Office of Education	Regional Adm. Office	Private Consulting	Total
Number of Library	223	250	14	487

Source: Korean Library Year Book, 2005. p.12.

Cooperative Public Library Network System: Needs and Functions

A major issue in the last 10 years in Korean libraries has been developing an efficient cooperative library network system to improve and enhance public library services to the citizens. Han (2004) suggested that to establish an effective and successful library network system, the following aspects should be reflected in the system:

- The rapid increase of information resources and information technologies
- The efficient library resource use via library resource sharing
- The system reflecting common problems of various libraries
- The system allowing citizens the equal opportunity to access information and services
- The system facilitating national and international information resources availability
- The system designed to develop scientific technology and citizen's welfare via

effective information use

- The system designed to build information-based society with informational and cultural richness

Also the *Library and Reading Development Law*, especially in Section 8, No.41, explains the basic functions of the network system and suggested that the cooperative library network needs to be organized based on the following four functions:

1. Networked information and resources
2. Standardization of material production, information process, services and equipments
3. Effective library operations using cooperative collection development, interlibrary loan, cooperative cataloging and cooperative library card system
4. Other cooperative activities such as art or reading programs among various libraries

Most of all, the major function of the cooperative library network system needs to provide citizens with the seamless access to the riches of the information and technology. Lee et al. (2001) analyzed the benefits of an effective library system in six aspects. First, it enables the participating libraries to broaden their information and services. Second, it enables libraries to maximize the use of their limited resources. Third, it assists library staff to develop professional skills. Fourth, it reduces the overlapping services and works. Fifth, it enables libraries to advertise their institutions and services. And sixth, it provides opportunities of cooperation and communication among participating libraries.

Cooperative Public Library Network System Practices

According to the *2005 Library Network Operating Statistics: Public Libraries (2005)*, the cooperative Korean public library network has been planned and implemented in the following areas:

- Offering online union catalog such as KOLAS II
- Cooperative collection development
- Cooperative cataloging using such as KOLAS-Net
- Cooperative depository system
- Cooperative cultural, art, or reading programs
- Cooperative advertising, public relations to improve public awareness of community events (e.g., cooperating with other local libraries for marketing network library services using newsletters, continuing education materials, or community events advertisement brochures)
- Cooperative library card and/or copy card system for inter-lending document delivery services among member libraries.

- Cooperative web resource sharing like web DB

<Figure 2> shows that among the total of 487 local public libraries, seventy of them are at Gyeonggi province where the most cooperative library projects were also developed and also many model libraries have been built recently. However, in other provinces such as Chungbuk (25), Jeonbuk (36) or Jeju (18), the number of public libraries is much less than that in Gyeonggi province (70) and also the cooperative library projects are very limited in terms of both numbers and services.

Barriers to the Effective Cooperative Library Network System

There are several possible barriers to the effective cooperative library network system such as structural barriers, administrative barriers, political barriers, technical barriers, and system barriers. Among these, the first three (structural, administrative and political) barriers are the most common problems in the cooperative library network system in Korea. However, it should be noted that the crucial prerequisite to building the successful network system is the awareness and willingness of regional or local government officers or administrators who need to support the library development and implementation.

1. Structural Barriers

The cooperative public library network system in Korea can be identified as a top-down operating structure where the National Library of Korea functions as a headquarters library administrating and controlling the system. This top-down and centralized, national government structure can be very efficient in building a standardized or revolutionary system development. However, this structure can not only slow down the communication flows among participating libraries but also make it hard to promptly reflect characteristics or needs of regional or local public libraries. Moreover, it makes it hard to promptly reflect local community users' feedbacks in the cooperative system. To resolve these problems, the cooperative library system try to create a more dynamic system structure which can put more weight on the regional administration power. That is, this dynamic cooperative system can take a hybrid form of centralized planning and control and decentralized operations, thereby facilitating two-way communications. This structure can improve both efficiency of planning and operations and responsiveness to local needs.

2. Administrative Barriers

As shown in <Figure 2>, the National Library of Korea and public libraries have different governing bodies for school and academic libraries. While the governing body for school and public libraries is the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, the governing body

for the National Library of Korea is the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Also <Table 2> shows that public library administrative structure has three different governing bodies such as 'Office of Education,' 'Regional Administration Office,' and 'Private Consulting Institution.' Under this situation, it is difficult to facilitate strategic alliances either among public libraries or among public, school, academic, and special libraries to build cooperative partnership.

3. Political Barriers

The Library and Reading Development Law has been the basic guidelines for the overall library strategic plans and development and the cooperative library network system development. According to this law, the chief minister of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism needs to establish the library development plan in every five years, which means that there is no independent agency in Korea like NCLIS (National Commission on Libraries and Information Science) in the U.S. Under this government structure, it is not easy to create quality library development strategies.

However, more recently, there have been many efforts and activities addressing the needs for strengthening library policies and development within the Korean government. As a result, it is expected that by the end of this summer, an independent agency for the library policy and development within the executive branch and under the control of the president will be established in Korea.

Conclusion

This paper overviewed the current Korean public library network system to identify the needs and characteristics of building a dynamic cooperative library network system. The vital role of the National Library of Korea, as a main headquarters library, for planning, coordinating, and implementing the network systems was discussed, along with the four levels of the top-down, centralized network structure. Then we explored the problems and issues related to structural, administrative, and political barriers. As a result, to build partnerships of cooperative library network system among participating libraries, it is crucial for the local government agency to recognize and understand the needs for developing more locally responsive cooperative network plans and strategies by building a dynamic cooperative library network system. It is recommended that this dynamic system takes a hybrid form of centralized planning and control and decentralized operations, thereby improving both efficiency of planning and operations and responsiveness to local needs. Finally, it should be noted that the recent changes in government structure such as establishing an independent agency for library services and policies are the promising sign for implementing the dynamic cooperative Korean library network system.

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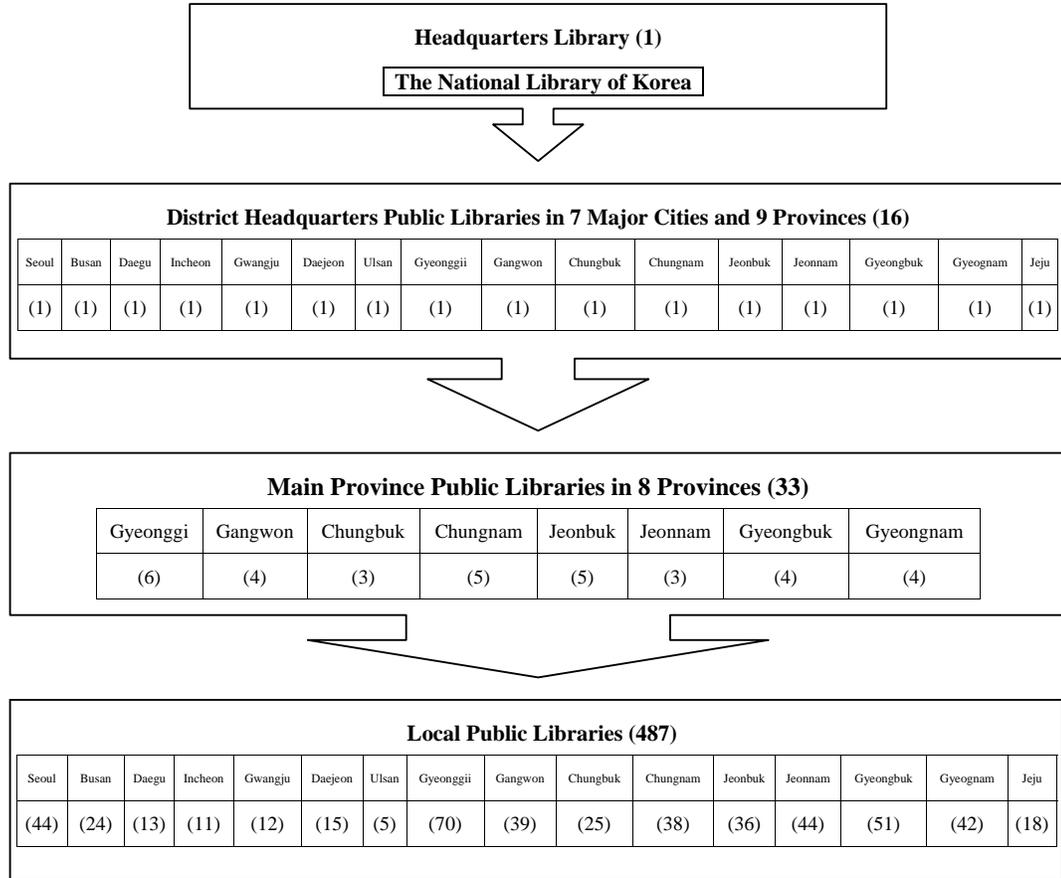
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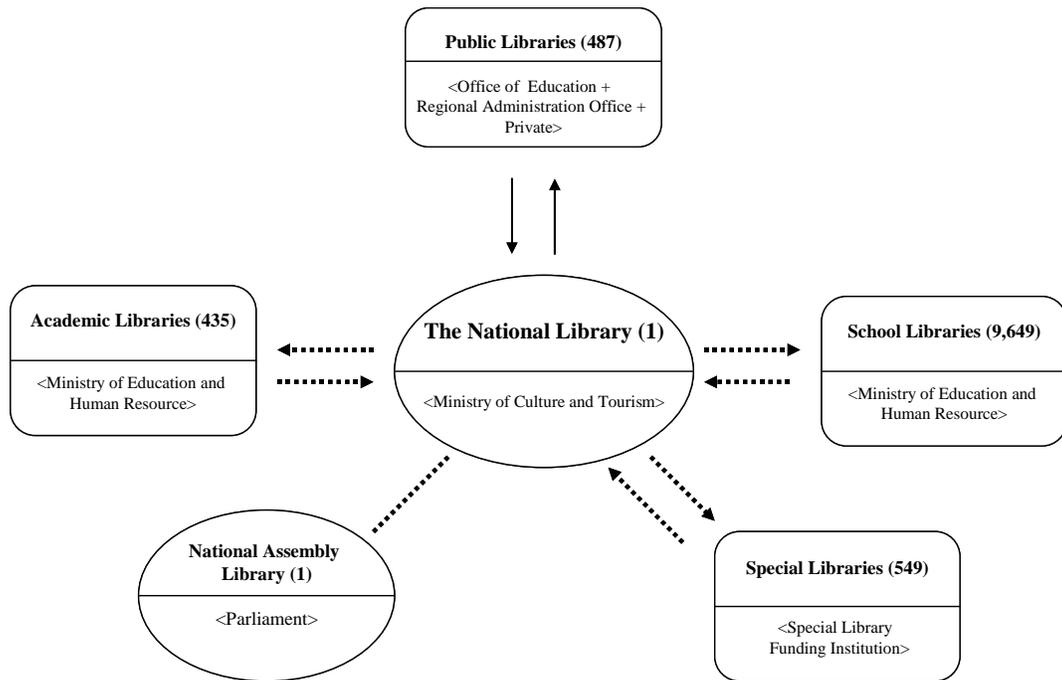
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<Figure 1> Cooperative Public Library Network System in Korea: Operating Structure



<Figure 2> Implemented Library Network System



(): Total Library Number

<> : Governing Institution

Source: Adapted from *2005 Library Network Operating Statistics: Public Libraries*. Seoul: the National Library of Korea, p. 305.