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The Growth of Community-based Library Services in Indonesia to Support Education

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Abstract :

Indonesia is paving the way towards fulfilling its reform agenda, which is not an easy task for such a vast and pluralistic country hit by severe economic crisis and political turmoil and composed of a 220 million population. The autonomy (decentralization) has been implemented through a Presidential Decree of 1999. Local governments are now playing an important role and have to take the responsibility for improving the quality of life of their community. The pressure of globalization has also made the people more aware of the importance of education and of freedom of information, which can be obtained through various means including public library services. However, compared to its neighbouring countries, the availability of public libraries in Indonesia is still disappointing, as a result of the government's decision to give priority to political and economic issues rather than to developing libraries.

The needs for reading materials and for gaining access to any format of information have triggered the growth of community-based libraries, pioneered by a number of individuals, institutions and NGOs throughout the country.

The paper observes the rise of community based-library services and their role to support people's education. Decentralization also opens opportunities for local governments to improve local library services. The paper also highlights the recently prepared draft for a National Library System as well as their impact towards the role of public library sector.

“The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups”

(Unesco Library Manifesto, 1994)

Background

Indonesia, the fourth most populous country in the world after China, India and the US. occupies almost 2 million square metres of land area, is a vast country and has various degrees of development from one to another region. Currently, the country is in a transition period of reform where people consider that democracy will be the pillar of the country amid rising economic crisis and political turmoil. As part of the global village community, the Indonesians understand that education is crucial as is reading and public access to information, where the public library plays a central role in enabling us to improve our quality of life.

Compared to its neighbouring ASEAN countries, library development in Indonesia and specifically public libraries are still far behind. They are many in numbers, and have been developed quite extensively in the past with the support of such international agencies as UNESCO (during the Independence Era) and the World Bank (at the beginning of the New Order). In terms of physical structures and number of librarians working in both public libraries and municipal libraries, Indonesia stands out among ASEAN countries. However, in terms of public services, like most public institutions in Indonesia, public libraries have been neglected and have not been placed on the government priority list. The Public library, an alternative lifelong educational resource is not well recognised by the government, let alone the communities themselves. During the Dutch colonial period, the first nation- wide library system was introduced through the ‘Commission of Popular Literature’ in 1908. Six hundreds and eight libraries were set up in school where the materials available were only in Dutch and restricted to a certain level of Indonesian society whom the Dutch tried to politically influence and engage with. The expansion of the libraries, which were later opened to the public was tremendous. By 1930, there were 2,686 libraries. Most of them however were destroyed during the Japanese occupation in 1942 to 1945. After the Independence of the Republic of Indonesia in August 1945, the Ministry of Education and Culture set up the first state-oriented library (“Perpustakaan Negara”) whose main objective was increasing illiteracy rate. The concept of building this nation- wide library infrastructure was managed and supervised by the government. It was then that Indonesia along with other countries adopted Unescos Library Manifesto, aimed at providing access to information and to improving the quality of society. Throughout the years we have seen that the implementation of the manifesto was not optimal. The Unesco Library Manifesto is universal but may not be suitable for a country where literacy rate is still a problem and where the community is not empowered as the structure is more government oriented. Public Library development is moving slowly and is not able to achieve its objectives as laid out in The Unesco Library Manifesto. The vastness of the country, bureaucracy, lack of understanding of a public library’s role,

insufficient funding, shortage of professionals and low reading habits are a few examples of constraints facing us in Indonesia.

Along the way, there were changes on the status of library management in Indonesia, from Ministry of Education to other Ministerial structures. To date public library management in Indonesia comes under the auspice of National Library and Ministry of Home Affairs, quite a complicated structure. The first is responsible for capacity building while the later for the setting –up and management of public libraries at regional level and down to the village level (the bottom of the community network). Recent implementation of Autonomy (decentralization) gives more authority and responsibility to local government to improve their community better including managing the public library. Unfortunately, the public library's role in Indonesia has not fully served the society's needs for access to information or lifelong learning resources yet. They are still considered inadequate to achieve these objectives.

We all believe that the library is an agent of change, considering that the presence of a good library enables us to stimulate the community's mindset of the importance of a better quality of life through the information available. The involvement of government in running public library management in Indonesia is a double edged sword, it helps nation wide library related programme and activities while on the other hand, the stamp of government ownership discourages society's contribution to the development. . They feel that providing library service is government's task not the society's. Currently, there is 1 National Library, 25 National Provincial Libraries, 519 University Libraries, 12,620 school libraries, 769 public libraries at city level and 800 special libraries. The number of libraries available is still inadequate to cater for community needs. Level of education varies from one region to another and different approaches for library services will be required if we really want to ensure that the public library can play its role as a lifelong learning resources.

Quite a number of programmes have been carried out throughout the years by the libraries and institutions concerned. However, the impact of such programmes is still low and do not touch the grassroots in remote area who really needs such programmes to help them in improving their life. Reading habits are still a problem in this area. In other cases, lack of reading material is a problem. Since the economic crisis, 30% of Indonesian Publishers collapsed and publishing sector is declining, from 595 publishers to 397. To some extent, people consider that the price of books are still too high thus books are not considered primary needs in life. The public library should ideally accommodate these needs but this is not an easy task to carry out as such services are not widely available. Proper public libraries can only be found in big cities.

Community Initiatives

1998 marked the resignation of Soeharto, the second Indonesian President who ruled the country for thirty two years. It was the beginning of the so called reform agenda, when issues of democracy and human rights become popular. People begin to realize that access to information and an inclusive public library is a person's rights and that community participation to improve quality of life and social welfare should be open and not dominated by government.

Having seen the slow progress of public library development, a number of individuals and institutions initiated setting-up community-based libraries opening their collection to public. Early 1970s and 80s, Yayasan Idayu, Pusat Dokumentasi H.B.Jassin and N.H.Dini were popular and heavily used by community to complement the few public library available. They were purely managed by individuals. Unfortunately, two of the services closed due to insufficient funding to maintain such services. Recent years, have seen the rise of such initiatives throughout the country. Public figures, young inspired people and several religious organizations contributed to the growth of community based library development. They believe that a different approach in providing reading material to the public might be more appropriate. Be it reading rooms, small and simple libraries or mobile libraries, the main objective of these activities is bridging the gap of public reading and information available to the community. In some cases, the services are aimed at specific target audiences such as communities in conflict areas, marginalized society (i.e. in the slum area) or remote areas.

The following activities illustrate such initiatives:

Yayasan Pustaka Kelana (The Wondering Book Foundation)

A group of librarians and university lecturers agreed to set up a mobile library to respond to children's reading material and holding a number of activities to stimulate reading habits such as storytelling and book exhibitions. They hired professional librarians to run a proper library and lend boxes of books to various areas in Jakarta.

Perpustakaan Prof. Dr. DoddyA.Tisna Amidjaja

Based upon the private collection of late Prof Tisnamidjaja, the main objective of the centre is to provide access to the community through reading and learning especially to young people as future leaders. Various activities such as HIV/Aids education, drug awareness and handicraft programme delivered in the centre. The library itself is developing a learning centre concept and they are now helping other community centres to set up similar programme and support some programme activities.

Coca Cola Foundation

Chaired by Prof Fuad Hasan, former Minister of Education, the mission of the Foundation is to provide alternative learning resources . One of their main programmes is to develop and effectively utilize libraries as learning centres for the community. They assist selected community libraries for the first three years on condition that these libraries are committed to a sustained development programme. Last year, the Foundation translated "Library for All" and distributed the publication widely to help those who plan to set up a community library. British Council Indonesia in collaboration with Foundation held workshops on Creative Writing and published the best work.

Sanggar Akar

Initiated by IB Karyanto, a social worker who cares for a group of street children. He invite them to read his book collection and during their free time he 'teaches' them some basic life skills and norms.

1001Buku (1001Books)

A group of young people communicated with each other through a mailing list, identifying ways of collecting reading material for children libraries. It was agreed that they would put boxes in public places such as shops, theatre and cultural centres to invite people to donate their unused reading material. They named it Book-Drop Programme. When they officially launched their programme which took place at the British Council library in Jakarta, people were impressed and agreed to support such an initiative. They now have more than 600 volunteers who manage the book donations and distribute them to children libraries in various part of the country. Their next initiative is to set up a book community, especially targeted at young adults and professionals. They are now in the process setting up centres , a meeting place where anybody can access reading material, discussion groups, attending creative writing class. An independent bookshop will be attached to the centres as they realize that running an integrated programme among publishers, librarians, writers will provide a solid ground for a sustainable programme.

In Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN), an Islamic University, a new approach has been introduced to supporting the community library. Small funding is given to students to set up a simple and small community library project during their field study.

In Batam, they assist the management of 380 community-based libraries as part of community's initiatives to improve the quality of life of their community through the availability of material suitable to their needs. The Bangka community help each other to manage their school and public library network through material procurement on agriculture, relevant to support the needs of their community to improve their life.

Such initiatives should be recognized and maintained through wider community participation. They are able to read people's immediate needs by bringing reading materials and programme activities (e.g. storytelling, writing class, discussion) to the community. In conflict and slum area where schools are not available, the impact of these initiatives is obvious.

Lessons Learned

People in Indonesia are fully aware of the importance of education and its resources such as the library as a gateway to better knowledge and better quality of life. Unfortunately, library development is not on the government's priority agenda amid economic crisis and political turmoil that hit the country. Empowering the community to support library services is worth considering. The illustration given are success stories of how the community can contribute helping themselves. Individual and institutional initiatives should be encouraged and supported. Networks of such initiatives provide a strong ground to give access to people throughout the country. They are independent and they consider that informal organization based on voluntary basis and moral obligation will be the key to success in helping community.

Library development in Indonesia is very much government oriented as history has shown it. It can not be denied that support from Government is still required, but adopting a different approach such as through the community participation, better understanding of their expectation is worth to note. Under the government decree, the National Library is responsible for library development, their programme is geared more towards formal and government related activities. Currently, the National Library System bill has just been drafted. The production of such document is to address the mechanism of library development in Indonesia and to repositioning the role of the library to support education. There should be a mechanism for recognizing and supporting any initiatives to improve public library services throughout the country. These initiatives are a compliment to what the Government has been doing in promoting literacy and providing access to information.

Through the implementation of Autonomy, local government has more opportunity to manage their community, including the provision better public library services as a means of educating the community towards better life. They should encourage experts and public figures in their region to lead the community to take part in developing the library.

Since 2001, we have seen the growth of a number of library forums, namely Public Library Forum, University Library Forum, Special Library Forum and School Library Forum. Better communication and the sharing of best practice are the objectives of the Forum. The establishment of the Forum is facilitated by the National Library. However, the activities and strategic plans of individual forum is purely independent.

The National Library in Indonesia has done a lot of library related projects to improve library services in Indonesia. They have prepared the draft for the National System of Libraries in Indonesia which tries to manage and supervise the library system nation-wide. How will the regulation respond to individuals and non-government initiatives such as those mentioned above and whether the document is relevant to a society where reform is ongoing remain to be seen? Only time will tell.