

Fast Forward to the Future: building a digital repository for the Myanmar Parliament to store, organize and make accessible parliament's documents for the use of Members of Parliament, parliamentary Staff and Myanmar citizens

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Abstract:

Myanmar's Parliament is only 3 years old in its current incarnation. After many years of military rule, the political and parliamentary leadership have set ambitious targets to review all the major legislation by the election in late 2015, which means reviewing 300 laws. This transitional time in Myanmar is bringing rapid reform in many fields including legislative processes. Amidst the many new processes that have to be planned and implemented are better mechanisms for sharing bills and laws with MPs, parliamentary staff and the public.

This young Parliament wants to undertake public consultation on bills, but must also develop ways of telling the Parliament and the public about what bills are being introduced and about how legislative processes work. Other needed reforms for the Parliament are the implementation of ICT infrastructure and information management tools to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the work of supporting Parliament. These two streams of work have come together in a project to build and share a digital repository. This project is one of several in a programme of work to support the development of parliamentary administration by UNDP/IPU. A number of parliamentary information experts with library, ICT or information management backgrounds have come to Myanmar to work with Parliamentary staff and the UNDP/IPU project team. The IFLA network of parliamentary libraries has been pivotal in recruiting suitable experts.

The result has been speedy implementation of a digital repository to collect, store, organise and make accessible parliamentary documents. The most important group of documents to make more accessible are the Bills before Parliament. There have been a number of significant challenges to resolve in collecting documents, categorizing them. One unforeseen technical challenges was the translation of the code into the Myanmar language and deciding which Myanmar font to standardise upon to ensure maximum accessibility.

The Myanmar story is an excellent example of being able to learn from the experience of others to transition quickly to a more modern information infrastructure that supports access to core information about the legislative process for MPs, parliamentary staff and the public.

Keywords: Digital Libraries, digital repositories, Myanmar Parliament, Hluttaw, Access to bills

1 INTRODUCTION

The title of our paper – Fast Forward to the Future, refers to the challenges that a developing country faces in adopting technological advances from the developed world. We are able to access expertise from the countries where digital libraries are common to help us move forward but the challenges to building one from scratch as part of a transition to a digital future should not be underestimated.

2 MYANMAR

Let me begin by describing briefly the context for our project. Myanmar is the largest country in mainland South East Asia. At 677,000 sq km, it is about the size of the UK and France combined. The population is about 60 million, with many diverse ethnic groups. Myanmar has borders with China, Thailand, Bangladesh, Laos and India.

Our current Parliament is only 3 years old, with a long period of military government prior to that. There were a number of steps towards restoring a parliamentary democracy which resulted in a general election in November 2010. A by-election was held on 1st April 2012 to replace the members who had been appointed as Ministers and to allow a more democratic representation. Already there is much discussion about what the 2015 election will mean for our very young democracy.

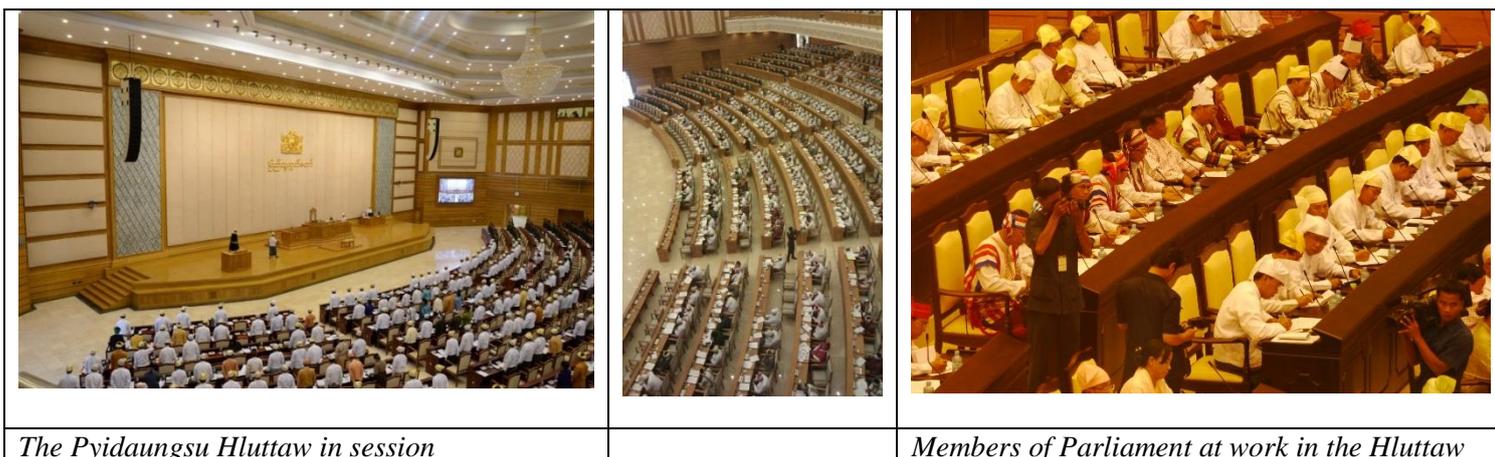


3 MYANMAR'S PARLIAMENT

The Myanmar Parliament is a bi-cameral Parliament. The Pyithu Hluttaw translates as the House of Representatives and the Amyotha Hluttaw translates as the House of Nationalities.

The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw is an innovation of the Myanmar Parliament and comprises the MPs from both the Houses. The joint House or Union Assembly discusses particularly important matters such as the Budget and State Plans. It also meets as a joint House to consider legislation when the two Houses have different views on a bill.

The President of Myanmar is elected by MPs rather than by the people of Myanmar. The Speakers of each House make many decisions about the business of the Hluttaw and have considerable influence upon the work of the Hluttaw Offices.



The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw in session

Members of Parliament at work in the Hluttaw

3.1 Goals for the Hluttaw

Although our Parliament has only been in existence for a short period, we have an ambitious programme to review Myanmar’s legislation and improve the legislative processes. The intention is to review about 300 laws by the end of 2015, which means a heavy workload for MPs and parliamentary staff alike.

Improving legislative processes by having better informed debates on bills, and hearing evidence during public consultations rely upon good access to the core documents, such as the bills, committee reports, etc. The Hluttaw Office, in conjunction with the UNDP/IPU Parliamentary Support Programme is working on three key development areas. These are:

- Developing a Learning Centre where staff and MPs can be trained on the skills required for parliamentary work
- Developing a Digital Parliament
- Developing Research Services

The contribution of our project to the second of these goals is the main focus of our paper where we have a project to improve access to parliamentary information for MPs, parliamentary staff and the people of Myanmar. Creating a Digital Parliament requires parallel projects in the development of ICT infrastructure, online content relevant to the work of the Parliament and training of staff in the skills to manage and use digital resources.

4 DEVELOPMENT OF HLUTTAW LIBRARY



This empty space (May 2012) is now the Library



IPU assessment mission with Library staff in May 2012.

When the Inter-parliamentary Union, or IPU, sent an evaluation team to assess the requirements for the Library and ICT in May 2012, the library was in the process of moving to its current location inside the Parliamentary complex and there were only 7 staff working there. The photos above show what the space and staff looked like at that time. More senior staff were recruited in late 2012.

4.1 LRIS Development Plan 2013

From the beginning of 2013 we were assisted by a variety of international experts in parliamentary library and research services. In February Ms Moira Fraser from NZ and Mr Edward Wood from the House of Commons Library created a Development Plan which has guided our work since then. The IFLA network of international parliamentary library and research specialists has been important in providing expert support and advice.

Broadly, the Library, Research and Information Services Plan shaped the development of policy and guidelines for our work, the building of a broader parliamentary library collection with much more emphasis upon parliamentary documents, recruitment of new staff and training for those staff.

4.2 LRIS Services

Initially in 2013, we focused upon developing Library Services, Research Services were added in 2014 and now we are working to develop digital Information Services including the development of the Digital Library which is the focus of this paper.

The services we are currently providing to MPs and parliament staff include:

- Research briefing and services
- Answering individual research enquiries
- Reading newspapers & magazines
- Access to the internet



We are continuing to develop LRIS services as the skills of the staff improve and in the future our services will include:

- More in depth Research Services
- Answers to a wider range of individual research enquiries
- Access to online information
- Information management services

4.3 Library staff numbers



Library staff with visiting parliamentary experts, September 2013.

4.4 The ICT environment

Myanmar is not yet very developed in the use of computers, with a low penetration of computers in households of less than 10%. Smart phone use is expected to reach about 33% by 2015. Within the Hluttaw, computers are used mainly for producing paper documents for office work, but there are only a few computers which must be shared by the staff in a team. There is no network to connect the computers internally, so it is not easy to share the information across the Hluttaw. Most staff members and many of the MPs are not yet using email.

Like the LRIS Development Plan, there is an ICT Development Plan for the Hluttaw

The ICT Development plan has these main goals:

- Build the network and server infrastructure to connect everyone across the Parliament and keep our information safe and secure
- Create databases with parliamentary information to help us access the information
- Train ICT staff to support a full service ICT environment
- Train content managers (information services staff and procedural staff) to submit and organize content
- Train Parliamentary staff to use the online tools

The Myanmar Parliament has ambitious goals to become a Digital Parliament, because it will support doing the work of Parliament more effectively and efficiently, as well as making it easier to share information with the people. Working towards a Digital Parliament requires us to undertake initiatives in parallel that develop the ICT infrastructure, build digital content and ensure that MPs and staff have the skills to use the digital information.

4.5 The context for a digital library in Myanmar

As there is limited use of computers in Myanmar, education of librarians about online services focuses on the creation of library catalogues, but does not yet cover the creation of digital libraries. Our librarians understood that e-libraries were about online collections of books, so there was a lot to learn about creating a digital library full of online documents created by the Parliament.

It is still challenging for us to understand the context of how a digital library will improve our services when we are building one of the first digital libraries in Myanmar. This means that it is not easy for us to visit another example of a digital library to understand how it will improve services, although we have had some opportunity to see digital libraries in other countries. The theoretical knowledge about what a digital library is and how it works, is difficult to learn without consolidation through practical experience. When we are building one of the first digital libraries in Myanmar, the practical experience will only come over time. At present, we must rely upon the advice and support from the international parliamentary experts working with us, as we don't yet fully comprehend the impact of all the decisions that must be made at the beginning in constructing a Digital Library. We could not have got this far without the guidance we received from Ms Claudia Cuevas, Ms Angelica Fuentes and Ms Alejandra Munoz who came from the Library of the National Congress of Chile to assist us with managing the content of the Digital Library.



5 BUILDING A DIGITAL LIBRARY

The new knowledge we have needed to acquire in the course of building a Digital Library include:

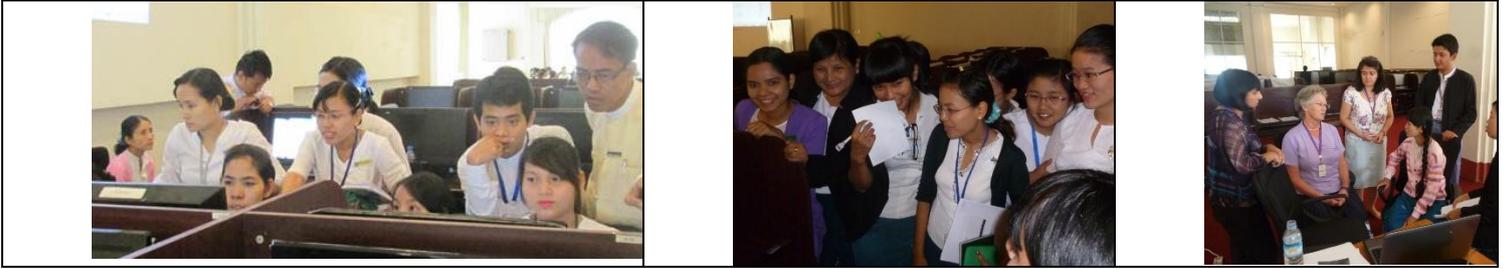
- What is a digital library
- How will it improve our ability to deliver services
- What infrastructure do we require to build a digital library
- Who needs to do what to support a digital library

5.1 Practical experience

Learning about metadata and how it impacts how easy it is to find documents has been one of the biggest learning curves for us. We had a lot to learn and there is still a lot that we are learning. Frankly, we have relied heavily upon the advice from the international experts working with us in this. We are using a metadata schema which is based upon the metadata schema used in the parliamentary library of Chile. We have allocated people to the task of managing the Digital Library and we are looking forward to the time when we understand the metadata schema well enough that we can make changes to it based upon our own decisions.

The new knowledge we needed to acquire includes:

- How do we submit documents
- What documents should we submit
- How do we describe those documents
- What metadata structure is required
- Who should manage the metadata schema
- What difference does metadata make
- How will we search the Digital Library
- What quality control is needed



5.2 Building the repository

As well as learning how to submit documents to a Digital library, we needed to resolve which servers should host our Digital Library so that the digital documents could be shared with everyone. With our current ICT environment we have many computers which are not connected to each other, so many small islands of information exist which mean that you must know who has the information to find it. A Digital Library is an important step in creating a place to store documents that can be accessed across the Parliament by MPs and parliamentary staff.

On the recommendation of the library and ICT experts we chose the open source software D-Space as a repository tool that will combine well with our library system. An ICT and Library expert, Dr Edmund Balnaves from Australia came to Myanmar to work with us. His work included scoping the design for a Digital Library and then to install it and train ICT to manage it.

5.3 Language issues

One very important issue for making the Digital Library useful for supporting the work of the Hluttaw is the requirement that we should be able to submit and access documents in the Myanmar language. Dr Balnaves worked with Myanmar translators within our team who had the requisite knowledge of Myanmar language and the technical terms to translate the D-Space software into Myanmar.

There are a number of fonts used for the Myanmar language, although only one of these is Unicode compliant, which is necessary for internet search engines to be able to read our data. Fortunately Dr Balnaves was able to write a script for us that would translate from more commonly used Myanmar fonts to Myanmar 3 which is the Unicode compliant font. This just leaves us with the challenge of adopting Myanmar 3 font as the standard within the Parliament, and training all of our staff to be able to type using this font.

5.4 Collecting the content

Now that the Digital Library has been created, with the capacity to add rich metadata to describe the documents and their subjects so that appropriate connections can be made between the documents, the next focus area is collecting the content for the database. Since our Parliament is only 3 years old, all the parliamentary documents have been created using a computer. Many of the parliamentary documents, such as Minutes of Proceedings (which you may know as Hansard) have been shared via websites which have been developed for each Hluttaw. These documents are relatively easy to collect.

Obtaining digital copies of Bills is more challenging, especially obtaining the copies of the Bills at the time they will be discussed in the Hluttaw. We are still working on this. Perhaps it is because the Bills are viewed as government documents, drafted by the Government Departments and managed by the Attorney General's Office.

The development of the Research Service has demonstrated to us how important improved access to Bills is to MPs, as the most popular research briefings are those about bills currently being debated. At present, it is not easy for the people of Myanmar to know about the Bills being debated, or to access copies of those Bills, so how much demand there is for this service is unknown.

5.5 Managing the database

In addition to the content work which has been assigned to LRIS staff, there are also new ICT activities which ICT staff have been trained to accomplish. As the Hluttaw (Parliament) has only a few servers which are not fully connected by a network yet, we sought a supplier who could host the database externally to the Parliament. The chosen supplier came up with an innovative solution which meant the Digital Library could be hosted within the Hluttaw while the content is being collected. Once there is sufficient content to launch the Digital Library, the database will be copied to a server in Yangon (Myanmar's large commercial city) to provide that access.

Staff from the supplier company and the Hluttaw's ICT staff were trained in the procedures required to manage the D-Space Digital Library by Dr Edmund Balnaves.

6 CHALLENGES

There have been many different kinds of challenges we have overcome doing this work. But it is almost always the people challenges that provide the biggest challenges and need the most focus to overcome.

The Library, Research and Information Services staff have had to acquire a great deal of new knowledge. They have had to learn basic computer skills as well as more complex theoretical knowledge about digital libraries and metadata. The biggest challenge has been to provide an appropriate balance between new knowledge and practical experience to cement the new knowledge.

As our digital library is still in an evolving stage, with a small number of documents in it, it is difficult for the LRIS Staff to understand how the decisions made now, will impact upon how the Digital Library will work in the future. We are very grateful for all the assistance from the IFLA international community of parliamentary library and researchers who have come and worked with us. Without their support and advice, we could not have got this far.

The other area that has required new connections with staff we did not work closely with previously, is the procedural staff in the Parliament (called Records and Meeting staff in our Hluttaw). There are staff who create the documents we want to share in the Digital Library who we need to work with to make them available and to get authorization to share them publicly.

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have achieved a lot so far, and we still have big ambitions for what we still need to achieve to provide high quality library, research and information services to our Parliament and to the people of Myanmar. We have many people to thank for helping us to make the progress we have.

We would like to say a very particular thank you to the experts who came to help us build the digital library: Dr Edmund Balnaves from Australia and Ms Claudia Cuevas, Ms Maria Angelica Fuentes and Ms Alejandra Munoz who travelled half way around the world from the National Congress of Chile to teach us about digital libraries and how to submit documents.