

Session 4: Preparedness for Response, Recovery and Reconstruction (1)

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Short presentation by Naoko Kobayashi, Senior Librarian, National Diet library (Director, IFLA PAC Regional Centre for Asia)

“IFLA’s Commitment in Disaster Preparedness and Response”

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, IFLA in short, is a global body of the library community. IFLA has set preservation and disaster risk reduction of cultural heritage as one of its key initiatives after the Haiti earthquake in 2010, when IFLA was not able to provide enough information on the libraries’ cultural heritage in response to UNESCO’s inquiry. While there are many common publications in libraries, there are also old archival documents and local collections which are unique to each library. We call such collections “documentary heritage” and “cultural heritage in the library,” as they are irreplaceable and important to both the library and the local community.

Libraries, in times of emergency, bear the role of providing practical information for livelihood restoration, and books for spiritual comfort. If the library materials held at a disaster-affected library are damaged, other libraries can support its service by sending books. Materials of this kind are replaceable. On the other hand, it is part of the libraries’ role to identify and protect their irreplaceable cultural heritage collections from disasters. In this respect, disaster preparedness is an issue that libraries have in common with museums and archives.

Among the cultural heritage in libraries, there are modern printed materials as well as documents that are considered historically valuable. Local materials like the community’s commemorative issues or picture albums are usually bound in simple ways, and do not look like precious treasures in times of peace. But for example, when a tsunami hits the area and destroys its original landscape, such materials are the only clues to recall what it looked like before the disaster. Local collections also tell stories of past disasters which happened in the area. One librarian in an earthquake-affected area said: even if a town is rebuilt and a new library is constructed, we cannot call it a “real rehabilitation” without the local collection which shows us the history of our town.

IFLA started the Risk Register project and has been making efforts to build a database which collects information on libraries’ cultural heritage that is at risk, and to set up a website for librarians which will give information on disaster preparedness and response. In the database, comprehensive information of each cultural heritage will be gathered, including not only the location of a heritage collection, but also the potential risks for cultural heritage and the libraries’ capacity for disaster response (e.g. number of properly trained staff). IFLA aims to, in case of emergency, provide these data to key partners in disaster response, such as UNESCO and the Blue Shield, and cooperate with them to support the libraries’ recovery.