LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM: URGENT NEEDS FOR STANDARDIZATION

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ABSTRACT

In order to maintain a steady and balanced progress in the long run, Vietnam needs to improve ways of collecting, preserving, and disseminating knowledge. Libraries can play an important role in these efforts. This paper discusses issues relating to library standardization, which can contribute to the development of the national information policy and the establishment of national information infrastructure. In the first part of the paper, standardization is defined as a tool for uniformity and quality control. The second part of the paper is an attempt to explain why Vietnam needs a library standardization program now. The author then suggests, in the third part of the paper, that priority be given to the creation of standards for information organization, retrieval, and exchange. An ISBD-based national cataloguing code and a national MARC format are suggested. In the last part of the paper, steps to be taken in the implementation of the library standardization program are recommended. The National Library of Vietnam should play the leading role in the whole process.

For the past seven years, under the "DOI MOI" (Innovation) policy, Vietnam has been enjoying a healthy annual growth rate, with GNP jumping from $9.6 billion US in 1991 to $20.3 billion US in 1995 (Global 1997). This is quite a remarkable success for a country that was almost on the verge of collapse ten years ago. To maintain a steady and balanced progress in the long run, incessant efforts to collect, preserve, and disseminate knowledge, including both methodologies and technologies, in several fields of development will be needed. Libraries can play an important role in these efforts. It has been noted that in Vietnam "increasingly, …attention has come to focus on potential of libraries to contribute to the third revolution, in pursuit of economic development" (Macmillen 1990). Unfortunately, "there is no sound and comprehensive national information policy in the country" (Information 1995: 4). Even "the law on library is still on the preparation stage" (Information 1995: 5). Library standardization can contribute to the formulation and implementation of a national library development strategy.

This paper discusses the issues relating to this key component of an information policy and development plan for Vietnam in the future.

WHAT IS STANDARDIZATION FOR?

In general context, a standard means "something that is set up and established by authority as a rule for the measure of quantity, weight, extent, value, or quality" (Webster's 1965). In the library science context, standards mean "A set or code of rules established by national and international organizations for the purpose of bibliographic control, including those providing for the unique identification of bibliographic items, such as the International Standard Book Number and International Serial Number; the uniform description of items, such as the International Standard Bibliographic Description; and the exchange of bibliographic records by means of a bibliographic exchange format, such as MARC (Machine Readable Cataloging) format" (Young 1983). Standardization is the process of creating and implementing standards, and is defined as "a transition from individual thought to common thought, a transition from disorder to order and from arbitrary to law" (Standardization 1983). With the steadily increasing need for information, and the new technical capabilities for handling it, “standardization becomes increasingly important – to insure greater effectiveness of information services in all countries and the use of information and information systems across national, regional and institutional borders” (Atherton, 1977). Standardization, therefore, is aimed at achieving uniformity and it serves, in the end, as a quality control tool. Library catalogues which are produced under a certain standard cataloguing code can guarantee a certain level of information retrieval success, because that standard "will ensure a certain level of quality so that the record will be sufficiently complete and will be consistently arranged and hence that the content and the location of the record will be predictable" (Lunn 1970).

WHY STANDARDIZE NOW?

For a poor country, Vietnam possesses a remarkably sophisticated library system. Actually, there are two library systems in Vietnam: 1) the system of scientific libraries; and, 2) the system of public libraries.

The first system includes:

- The National Library of Vietnam
- The Central Library for Science and Technology
- The Library for Social and Human Sciences
- The sectoral libraries in the different ministries and state committees

- The special libraries including university / school libraries, R & D institution libraries, trade union libraries, and libraries in hospital and in enterprises. (Information 1995: 6-7. See Note).

In the public library system, there are:

- 4 Central libraries
- 53 City and provincial libraries
- 486 District libraries
- 23 Children libraries (Statistical 1994)

Computers have also been installed in most scientific libraries and in a number of public libraries since the early 1990s. "In 1994, the provincial libraries are linked with the National Library to form public libraries network" (Information 1995: 14). The Internet has also been introduced to the country and by 1995, "the Internet system in Vietnam has grown to 35 nodes, 32 in Hanoi, two in Ho Chi Minh City, and one in Nha Trang" (Information 1995: 28). In terms of human resource development, there are currently three library schools in Vietnam, one in Hanoi and two in Ho Chi Minh City. "It is estimated that there are about 22,300 full time information workers and librarians in Vietnam" (Information 1995: 33). Among these people, some have been trained recently in the United States (Nguyen, 1997, See Note). It is now the best time for the country to have a library standardization program in place, basically for two good reasons: 1) the library system is neither too small nor too big; and, 2) the country now has enough information and library professionals to take care of the complex planning and implementation of such a program.

WHAT STANDARDS SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED?

Library and information standards are numerous. There are standards for information organization, standards for information retrieval, standards for information systems, and standards for information services. There are also guidelines for library personnel performance, standards for different types of libraries (academic, school, public) in terms of collection development and services. The process of designing and implementing standards take many years. In the People's Republic of China, for forty years, 1949-1989, only "28 standards have been published and put into effect" (Feng 1992). It is just reasonable to expect that Vietnam would be able to go faster than that because, as a late comer, Vietnam could learn from the experiences of other countries. What the Vietnamese library leadership needs is a wise decision on prioritizing objectives of the standardization program. This paper suggests that top priority be given to standards in the area of information organization. Every national library system has two fundamental functions: 1) to collect, preserve, and disseminate national print and non-print publishing and research output; and, 2)

to exchange their information with other national systems. In other words, library materials should be organized in such a way that provides for effective retrieval and exchange. There is an urgent need for the Vietnamese national library system to standardize the way it organizes its collection for retrieval and exchange. What it needs are both a national cataloguing code and a national MARC format. This is not to say that no cataloguing code being currently used in Vietnam libraries; rather, it implicates that that cataloguing code should be standardized and implemented nation-wide. Although standards can be voluntary or mandatory, in the case of Vietnam, they could and should be mandatory. That cataloguing code should be ISBD-based in term of description, and could follow AACR2 in terms of choice and form of access points. Vietnam can learn from other Southeast Asian countries that have gone through this process, like Indonesia, where "another step toward the application of Indonesian rules in cataloguing is the introduction of the AACR and ISBD into the *Peraturan Katalogisasi Indonesia*. This manual (3rd edition, 1989) contains cataloguing rules pertaining to common usage in Indonesian libraries" (Rachmananta 1990). A group of North American librarians of Vietnamese origin (of which the author of this paper is a member) are in the process of translating the Concise AACR2 by Michael Gorman into Vietnamese (Gorman, 1989). Once published, the translation will be donated to Vietnamese libraries (See note for Gorman). To complete what is needed in the cataloguing field, Vietnamese librarians should also start working toward a standardized subject headings system in the Vietnamese language. This colossal project could be started by translating the Library of Congress Subject Headings list into Vietnamese with modifications to reflect local needs. As for the MARC format, it is recommended that Vietnam go for UNIMARC format. There are two good reasons behind this recommendation: first, the National Library of Vietnam has already adopted UNIMARC in its operations (McKercher 1995), and, secondly, there are more and more countries that adopt UNIMARC. In a survey conducted in 1993, and repeated in 1995, 35 of the 62 libraries (mostly national libraries) which responded have reported that they have decided to adopt UNIMARC for their operations (Wehner 1995). UNIMARC has been adopted for different reasons. Let's hear from some national library's experiences:

- The case of Portugal: "All those considerations led to the final decision: a national format for Portugal ought to be based on UNIMARC. In fact, UNIMARC had been designed to be compatible with such national formats as UKMARC, USMARC or MAB 1; and it appeared to be more up-to-date than the majority of national MARC formats, partly because of its linking structure, and partly because it was recommended by IFLA" (Campos1990).
- The Case of India: "Although the Bureau of Indian Standards had designed in 1985 the Indian MARC based on UK MARC, one of the reasons for choosing UNIMARC for the NLC was grounded on its aim to provide the mechanism for exchanging records among the national

bibliographic agencies by-passing the inherent difficulties created by multiple national MARC formats (Majumder 1992: 19)" and "one of the reasons for the adoption of UNIMARC by the National Library, ..., is its multilingual capability" (Majumder 1992: 22).

HOW SHOULD THESE STANDARDS BE IMPLEMENTED?

The National Library of Vietnam (NLV) should play an important role in the whole process since one part of its mandate is "centralized cataloguing and other bibliographical works" (Information 1995: 8). This recommendation is based on the fact that the NLV has experience in implementing UNIMARC in its operations as we have seen. It also has professional staff having experience working in international projects, one such instance being the VUC (Vietnamese Union Catalogue) Project conducted in coordination with the National Library of Australia (Jarvis 1993). NLV should begin the standardization program, under the auspices of the National Library Council, which, “composed of eminent librarians, has the duty to advise government” (Brazier 1993), by creating a National Task Force for Library Standardization Program with members drawn from the two library systems (scientific and public), from the library associations, like the Scientific Information, Documentation and Library Association of Ho Chi Minh City (SIDLA), from the three library schools, and also from the Central Department of Standardization, Metrology and Quality Control. The Task Force should be given clearly defined terms of reference, which emphasizes the leadership role of the NLV. At the beginning, the Task Force should have two committees, one for the cataloguing code and one or the MARC format. Each committee could have as many subcommittees as needed, for example, the cataloguing committee could have one subcommittee for each of the following areas: description (or ISBD), AACR2, access points, subject headings. To launch the program, a national conference on library cataloguing standards should be held, with guest speakers from other national libraries, especially from Southeast Asian countries and other developing countries as well. Funding for such a conference can be sought from IFLA Core Programs such as the Advancement of Librarianship Program (ALP) or the Universal Bibliographic Control and International MARC Program (UBCIMP) (Johansson 1992). Once the standards have been written, tested and approved by the National Library Council and the Central Department of Standardization, Metrology and Quality Control, documentation should be prepared and training provided nation-wide. The whole process could be expected to be completed in 5 years.

CONCLUSION

Vietnam is facing major challenges in her efforts to get herself ready for the fast-approaching new millenium. There is no doubt that libraries will be playing a very important role in this national endeavor. Leaders in almost all of

the developing countries are now sharing the same faith in what libraries can potentially contribute to the development of their countries; "Libraries are therefore needed for farmers, industrialists and scientists, planners, government officials and parastatal organizations, personnel and all people, i.e., rural and urban, who are engaged in the economic development of a country" (Tawete 1988). In order to make good contributions to the national economic development, Vietnamese libraries should have the right tools to organize their collections for effective retrieval and exchange. This view is not totally foreign to Vietnamese library leaders as witnessed by a British librarian since 1989 during a visit to the country on behalf of Unesco: “In particular, the desire to increase their international contacts, and become fully in tune with developments in the international information scene, were characteristic of the senior librarians, information workers and officials that we met” (Vaughan, 1989). For such progress to occur, library standardization is crucial.

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