

Enhancing Public Library Services in Anuradhapura District: A Comprehensive Analysis of Library Services during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected public library services globally, including the Anuradhapura district of Sri Lanka. This study explores the challenges public libraries faced during the pandemic and identifies strategies implemented to sustain services. All 34 public libraries in the A were purposively selected for the study, with data collected through a self-administered and semi-structured questionnaire administered to public librarians or a library staff member who represents the librarian. The response rate for the questionnaire was 91.1%, representing 31 public libraries, with three public libraries not responding. Data collected using the questionnaire were quantitative and analyzed using Excel software. The findings reveal that while most libraries experienced reduced patronage (90.3%) and operational challenges such as unavailability of adequate facilities to introduce alternative library services during the pandemic (77.4%) and travel difficulties faced by the staff (71.0%).

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A minority adopted innovative methods such as providing scanned reading materials via WhatsApp (45.5%) and conducting awareness sessions on social media (36.4%). Lack of technical infrastructure (48.3%), inadequate staff training to provide services using new technologies (41.4%) and lack of Internet facilities (34.5%) were prominent barriers to service continuity, with 93.6% of libraries unable to adopt new technological means. Despite these constraints, libraries employed adaptive measures such as roster-based attendance (74.2%), flexible working hours (71.0%), and waived patron fines (87.1%) to address operational challenges. Notably, only 29.0% of libraries collaborated with external institutions during the pandemic, highlighting missed resource-sharing opportunities. The study underscores the need for digital transformation, improved staff training on using technological means when providing library services, and policy frameworks to enhance library resilience during future disruptions. Evidence-based recommendations include increasing digital resource allocations, fostering collaborations, and equipping staff with technical competencies to deliver hybrid library services. By implementing these best practices, public libraries can ensure equitable and uninterrupted access to information, even during unprecedented times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Digital transformation, Library resilience, Public libraries, Service continuity

Introduction

Libraries have long been recognized as powerful catalysts for social development, serving as essential information hubs that promote equity, literacy, and lifelong learning. By ensuring free and equitable access to high-quality information in various formats, written, electronic, and audio-visual, libraries contribute significantly to improving the quality of life and fostering democratic participation among citizens.

Across the globe, all types of libraries; national, public, and academic are entrusted with the responsibility of providing inclusive access to information that supports educational and personal development. Public libraries, in particular, have a unique mandate to serve diverse communities by offering resources that encourage reading, learning, and informed decision-making. As Krolak (2006) emphasizes, libraries play a crucial role in cultivating literate environments by providing relevant and engaging reading materials. Echoing this, Musingafi (2012) highlights the pivotal role of public libraries in fostering access to knowledge and wisdom, which in turn drives community development and empowerment.

In this context, libraries stand as foundational institutions in the knowledge society, bridging information gaps and empowering individuals to participate meaningfully in social, educational, and economic spheres.

Since March 2020, all public and academic libraries throughout Sri Lanka have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and affected by travel bans, remote office operations, lockdowns, and social distancing. Most public and academic libraries have tried to provide library services as far as possible during COVID-19. Libraries used different strategies and innovations to provide service at a maximum level and adapt to the situation.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic raises a chance for libraries and librarians to rethink library services and innovations.

According to the data from the Statistical Handbook on Libraries in Sri Lanka (2018), there are 34 public libraries in the Anuradhapura District. Most were severely impacted and unable to maintain service delivery mechanisms due to the resource-constrained conditions in the rural areas in Anuradhapura. Although a few studies focus on Sri Lankan rural public libraries and their specific responses during the COVID-19 crisis (Perera, 2020), there is a lack of empirical evidence in the literature on a comprehensive analysis of the response of public libraries in A towards the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hence, evidence-based data is crucial to facilitating an effective planning process for a future pandemic within the public library sector. Thus, this study would contribute to filling that gap by documenting real-world challenges and adaptive strategies used by rural public libraries in Sri Lanka and providing evidence-based insights to inform policy, planning, and crisis preparedness in the public library sector.

The objectives of this study are as follows,

- To assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on library services and community engagement among public libraries in A
- To identify challenges faced by public libraries during the pandemic
- To identify the practices used by public libraries in the A during the COVID-19 pandemic to mitigate the challenges they faced

Literature Review

Public libraries play a key role in creating a knowledgeable and literate community by providing various forms of reading materials for all ages in a community. They hold a social responsibility to assist in finding, using and interpreting appropriate information that provides opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, informed citizenship, recreation, creative imagination, individual research, critical thinking, and ultimately, empowerment in a highly complex world (Krolak, 2006).

Further, Scott (2011) has emphasized the importance of public libraries in terms of community development. They have highlighted five ways public libraries could contribute towards community building, such as serving as a channel to access information and learn, encouraging social inclusion and equity, fostering civic engagement, creating a bridge to resources and community involvement, and promoting economic vitality within the community (Scott, 2011).

Public libraries serve as community institutions and places for social gatherings, promoting democracy, equality, and social justice, expanding access to information, spreading culture and knowledge, and fostering meaningful and educational leisure time (Aabø, 2005).

Scientific literature has suggested that public libraries can go beyond their traditional role of keeping and disseminating knowledge during crises and disasters. According to Veil and Bishop (2014), public libraries can offer support during difficult times, such as natural disasters and health disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic, by enhancing their programs and services. Libraries can also offer new services that directly benefit crisis management initiatives. For example, libraries can donate their time and space to provide

emergency shelter and relief during natural disasters (Merenda, 2015). Moreover, they can offer vital information and guidance during public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. (Featherstone et al., 2012)

Although public libraries embrace a crucial role in society as knowledge keepers and disseminators, their role became crucial and vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has put public libraries in a different position, with their premises occasionally closed because of physical distancing efforts. Additionally, libraries' roles and activities were disrupted throughout the crisis. Furthermore, library staff were affected by being temporarily unemployed or their salaries being interrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in negative motivation among library staff (Haasio & Kannasto, 2020). In terms of positive changes caused by the pandemic, some public libraries were able to introduce new online services, and the library staff were keen to develop their skills in producing content on social media (Haasio & Kannasto, 2020).

According to the scientific literature, most public libraries worldwide shifted their services to more digitalized forms during the COVID-19 crisis by expanding their online collections and programming options (Haasio & Kannasto, 2020). International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2021) also supports this evidence by highlighting the libraries' worldwide transition to digital services such as providing e-books, virtual literacy programs, and online reference services during the COVID-19 crisis.

While most public libraries in developed countries positively faced the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation in the developing countries was different. For instance, the majority of libraries in Indonesia did not have a

preparedness plan for a disaster (Rachman, 2020). According to Kaur (2016), the majority of the university libraries in India and Pakistan also did not focus on library disaster planning. Moreover, a study based on Nigeria revealed that Nigerian public libraries faced challenges to offer maximum and effective library service due to poor reading culture, passive nature of librarians, negative disposition of the society towards library and information issues, poor funding for library education and library development, poor technologically driven library and information services amongst others (Ameh, et al., 2021). Ebijuwu et al., (2021), also stated that African libraries struggled with poor Internet, lack of devices, and digital illiteracy during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of the Sri Lankan context, Perera (2020) highlighted that digital exclusion and inadequate infrastructure limited remote service delivery of the public libraries in rural Sri Lanka.

It is evident that public libraries worldwide have demonstrated resilience and adaptability during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, by introducing innovative digital services and expanding their role in community support and information dissemination. While developed countries transitioned effectively to online modes of service delivery, public libraries in many developing nations, including parts of Asia and Africa, encountered significant challenges due to a lack of infrastructure, inadequate disaster preparedness, and limited digital literacy. In Sri Lanka, rural libraries, in particular, faced constraints in offering uninterrupted services, primarily due to digital exclusion and infrastructural limitations. Despite these documented experiences, there is a noticeable lack of localized studies examining the specific strategies adopted by public libraries in districts such as Anuradhapura during the pandemic. Furthermore, there is limited research on the effectiveness of these service adaptations and the lessons learned to

enhance resilience in future crises. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by comprehensively analyzing how public libraries in the Anuradhapura District responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, assessing the impact of the pandemic on library services and staff, and identifying opportunities for future service enhancement and crisis preparedness.

Research Design and Methods

All the public libraries (34) in Anuradhapura District were purposively selected for the study. The librarian or the respective library staff member representing the librarian was purposively selected from each library, and they were considered as the information provider for the study. A semi-structured and self-administered questionnaire was developed as the data collection tool, and Sinhalese language was used as the primary language to collect data via the questionnaire. The response rate for the questionnaire was 91.1%, representing 31 public libraries, with three public libraries not responding. Data collected using the questionnaire were quantitative and analyzed using Excel software.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the study population

The data presented in Table 1 reflects the distribution of library types across various categories. A dominant proportion (96.8%) of surveyed libraries is the Pradeshiya Sabha libraries. A smaller proportion (3.2%) falls under the MahaNagara Sabha category, while the Nagara Sabha and "Other" categories report no representation in the sample.

Table 1

Type of Library

Library Type	MahaNagara Sabha	Nagara Sabha	Pradeshiya Sabha	Other
Percentage	3.2 (n=1)	0 (n=0)	96.8 (n=30)	0 (n=0)

According to Table 2, the majority of libraries serve between 1001 and 5000 patrons (58.0%), followed by libraries with fewer than 500 patrons (22.6%). A small percentage of libraries cater to 5001-10000 patrons (12.9%) and 20001-25000 patrons (3.2%). No libraries fall within the 10001-15000 and 15001-20000 patron ranges, indicating a lack of libraries with higher patronage.

Table 2

Number of Patrons Registered in Libraries

Number of Patrons	Less than 500	501-1000	1001-5000	5001-10000	10001-15000	15001-20000	20001-25000
Percentage (%)	22.6 (n=7)	3.2 (n=1)	58.0 (n=18)	12.9 (n=4)	0.0 (n=0)	0.0 (n=0)	3.2 (n=1)

The data presented in Table 03 indicates that all libraries surveyed provide printed books, confirming their universal availability. Printed magazines (54.8%) and newspapers (90.3%) are also widely accessible, whereas non-printed magazines and newspapers are notably unavailable (0.0%). Libraries show moderate provision of audio-visual materials (45.2%) and limited availability of non-printed books (9.7%) and other materials such as map collections, newspaper article collections, etc. (3.2%).

Table 3

Types of Reading Materials Available in Libraries

Reading Material Type	Percentage (%)
Printed Books	100.0 (n=31)
Non-Printed Books	9.7 (n=3)
Printed Magazines	54.8 (n=17)
Non-Printed Magazines	0.0 (n=0)
Printed Newspapers	90.3 (n=28)
Non-Printed Newspapers	0.0 (n=0)
Audio-Visual Materials	45.2 (n=14)
Other Materials	3.2 (n=1)

The data indicates that library attendants are available in the majority of libraries, accounting for 93.5%. Librarians and other staff comprise 22.6%, while library information assistants constitute a much smaller proportion, at 3.2% (Table 4).

Table 4

Availability of Staff in Libraries

Staff Designation	Percentage (%)
Librarian	22.6 (n=7)
Library Information Assistant	3.2 (n=1)
Library Attendant	93.5 (n=29)
Other Staff	22.6 (n=7)

Library operations during the COVID-19 pandemic period

The data shows that the majority of libraries (90.3%) were open for public intermittently during the pandemic. A few libraries (6.5%) remained open for public regularly, while 3.2% were closed during this period.

Table 5

Status of Library Opening during the Pandemic

Status of Library Opening	Percentage (%)
Yes, regularly	6.5 (n=2)
Yes, but periodically	90.3 (n=28)
No	3.2 (n=1)

Table 6 presents the impact of the pandemic on library service demand. While the vast majority of libraries (93.6%) experienced a decrease in demand, a small percentage (3.2%) experienced an increase in demand or maintained unchanged levels.

Table 6

Impact of the Pandemic on Library Service Demand

Impact on Library Service Demand	Percentage (%)
Demand increased	3.2 (n=1)
Demand decreased	93.6 (n=29)
Demand remained unchanged	3.2 (n=1)

Table 7 indicates that 35.5% of libraries adopted alternative methods to provide services, while a majority (64.5%) did not implement such methods during the pandemic.

Table 7

Usage of Alternative Methods to Provide Services during the Pandemic

Usage of Alternative Methods	Percentage (%)
Used alternative methods	35.5 (n=11)
Not used alternative methods	64.5 (n=20)

Table 8 shows the various alternative methods used by libraries during the pandemic. The most commonly used methods were sending scanned reading materials via the WhatsApp platform (45.5%) and using platforms such as Facebook for awareness sessions (36.4%), while 9.1% of libraries used email for information requests, provided online resource usage facility provided interlibrary loan facility and conducted awareness programs via Zoom.

Table 8

Types of Alternative Methods Used to Provide Library Services during the Pandemic

Alternative Method Used	Percentage (%)
Sent scanned reading materials via WhatsApp	45.5 (n=5)
Requested information via email	9.1 (n=1)
Conducted awareness sessions via Facebook	36.4 (n=4)
Provided online resource usage facility	9.1 (n=1)
Provided interlibrary loan facility	9.1 (n=1)
Conducted awareness programs via Zoom	9.1 (n=1)

Approximately 29.0% of the surveyed libraries reported collaborating with other institutions during the pandemic. Conversely, a majority, 71.0%, did not establish such collaborations (Table 9).

Table 9

Collaborations with other Institutions during the Pandemic

Collaboration Status	Percentage (%)
Collaborated	29.0 (n=9)
Did not collaborate	71.0 (n=22)

The data in Table 10 reveals that 3.2% of libraries experienced increased fund allocations during the pandemic, while the majority of libraries reported a decrease of 58.1 %. Another 38.7% have claimed no change in their funding allocations.

Table 10

Changes in Library Fund Allocations during the Pandemic

Change in Fund Allocations	Percentage (%)
Allocations increased	3.2 (n=1)
Allocations decreased	58.1 (n=18)
Allocations remained unchanged	38.7 (n=12)

Library Communication Methods used with Patrons during the pandemic

Almost all libraries (96.8%) communicated with patrons during the pandemic. The most common communication method was using notice boards (93.3 %), followed by SMS (70.0%) and social media platforms (53.3%). Less frequently used methods to communicate with patrons during the pandemic include emails (10.00%) and library websites (10.00%).

Table 11

Methods of Communication with Patrons during the Pandemic

Communication with Patrons	Percentage (%)
Yes	96.8 (n=30)
No	3.2 (n=1)
If Yes, Used Communication Methods	
Notice Boards	93.3 (n=28)
Library Website	10.0 (n=3)
Library Social Media Platforms	53.3 (n=16)
Emails	10.0 (n=3)
SMS	70.0 (n=21)

Use of New Technological Means to Provide Services during the Pandemic

The majority of libraries (93.6%) did not use new technologies to provide services during the pandemic. Libraries that used new technologies to provide services (6.5%) provided online database search facilities (100%) and conducted Zoom programs (50.0%) as their new technological means.

Table 12

Use of New Technological Means to Provide Services during the Pandemic

Use of New Technological Means	Percentage (%)
Yes	6.5 (n=2)
No	93.6 (n=29)
If Yes, Type of Technology used	
Online database searching facilities	100 (n=2)
Conducted Zoom programmes	50.0 (n=1)
If No, Reasons for not using Technology	
Lack of training for the staff	41.4 (n=12)
Lack of technical devices	48.3 (n=14)
Lack of Internet facilities	34.5 (n=10)
Low level of digital literacy among staff	24.1 (n=7)
Lack of financial allocations	3.4 (n=1)
Low demand for digital services	3.4 (n=1)
No digitalized information to provide	10.3 (n=3)
Other	20.7 (n=6)

For those who did not use new technologies, the main challenges were the lack of technological devices (48.3%), staff training (41.4%), and Internet access (34.5%). Other barriers included a low level of digital literacy among staff (24.1%), absence of digitalized resources (10.3%), and minimal financial allocations or low demand for digital services (3.4%).

Challenges Libraries Faced during the Pandemic

The most common challenges libraries faced during the pandemic included limited patron attendance (90.3%), lack of facilities to introduce new and alternative services (77.4%), and travel difficulties faced by staff (71.0%). Difficulties to maintain social distance due to limited library space (58.1%), being infected by the Corona virus (both staff and their family members) (58.1%), unavailability of adequate staff to sanitize the library premises (54.8%), lack of guidance on maintaining the library during the pandemic (54.8%), lack of knowledge to introduce new and alternative library services during the pandemic (54.8%), and lack of support from the administrative bodies (52.0%) were also prominent challenges.

Table 13

Challenges Libraries Faced during the Pandemic

Challenges	Percentage (%)
Hesitation to report to work among library staff	42.0 (n=13)
Travel difficulties faced by the library staff	71.0 (n=22)
Difficulties in paying salaries	6.5 (n=2)
Unavailability of sanitary equipment	22.6 (n=7)
Unavailability of adequate staff to sanitize the library premises	54.8 (n=17)
Difficulties in maintaining social distance due to limited library space	58.1 (n=18)
Lack of facilities to provide sanitary services for the staff and the patrons	42.0 (n=13)
Limited patron attendance, although the library was open	90.3 (n=28)
Lack of guidance on maintaining the library during the pandemic	54.8 (n=17)
Lack of facilities to introduce new and alternative library services during the pandemic	77.4 (n=24)
Lack of knowledge to introduce new and alternative library services during the pandemic	54.8 (n=17)
Lack of support from the administrative bodies	52.0 (n=16)
Lack of adaptation to the pandemic among staff	35.5 (n=11)

Being infected by the coronavirus (both staff and their family members)	58.1 (n=18)
Other challenges	0.0 (n=0)

Methods used to tackle challenges brought by the Pandemic

Libraries had implemented various strategies to address the challenges posed by the pandemic. According to Table 14, a significant effort was made to alleviate financial pressures on patrons, with 87.1% of libraries writing off fines during the lockdown period. Further, introducing roster-based attendance mechanisms (74.2%), introducing flexible working hours for the staff (71.0%), establishing sanitary facilities at the library (67.7%), conducting awareness sessions for library staff (64.5%), and establishing social distancing mechanisms at the library (58.1%) were also among commonly implemented measures to tackle challenges brought by the pandemic. However, digital services were introduced less frequently, with only 9.7% of libraries adopting this approach.

Table 14

Methods used to tackle Challenges brought by the Pandemic

Challenges tackled	Percentage (%)
Introduced a roster-based attendance mechanism for library staff	74.2 (n=23)
Conducted awareness sessions for library staff	64.5 (n=20)
Introduced flexible working hours for library staff	71.0 (n=22)
Provided transport facilities for the library staff	13.0 (n=4)
Established sanitary facilities at the library	67.7 (n=21)
Established social distancing mechanisms at the library	58.1 (n=18)
Introduced digital library services	9.7 (n=3)
Wrote off patrons' fines during the lockdown period	87.1 (n=27)
Other measures	3.2 (n=1)

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive view of the challenges faced by libraries in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 pandemic and the actions they adopted in response to them. The pandemic created significant operational, financial, and logistical challenges for libraries and highlighted gaps in infrastructure, resources, and staff readiness that affected the ability to transition to digital services.

The majority of libraries surveyed were classified as local council libraries, with a significant concentration serving between 1001 and 5000 patrons. This suggests that libraries mainly serve moderate-sized communities, often in rural or semi-urban areas, with limited resource access. Despite the widespread availability of printed materials, such as books, newspapers, and magazines, the limited provision of non-printed materials highlights a significant gap in digital resources. This gap was particularly apparent during the pandemic, when physical access to libraries was restricted and digital services were not adequately developed or implemented.

During the pandemic, the majority of libraries operated periodically, with only a small proportion remaining open regularly. This reflects the broader trend of limited access to physical spaces due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. As a result, the demand for library services significantly decreased, with nearly 94% of libraries experiencing reduced patronage. The lack of demand highlights libraries' difficulties maintaining contact with their communities during such a crisis.

In response to these challenges, some libraries sought alternative methods of service delivery. While a significant proportion (64.52%) of libraries did not adopt alternative methods, 35.48% implemented strategies such as sending scanned materials via WhatsApp or conducting awareness sessions via Facebook. These findings highlight the ability of some libraries to adapt to digital communication tools, but they also reveal the barriers many libraries face in utilizing such platforms. The relatively low use of new technologies, such as online databases or Zoom programs (6.45%), further highlights library staff's limited technical capacity and training, complicated by the lack of infrastructure such as Internet access and technological devices. In terms of that, some studies have highlighted the importance of digital transformation in libraries during such a crisis. According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2021), libraries worldwide have transitioned to digital platforms to maintain service delivery, providing e-books, online educational resources, and virtual literacy programs during COVID-19. Moreover, Smith (2020) highlighted the need for regular training and professional development among library staff to empower them with skills to deliver digital services to their library users.

The inadequate knowledge and resources available to libraries further compounded the challenges related to technology adoption. Many libraries reported a lack of facilities and guidance on introducing new and alternative services during the pandemic, with the most significant barriers being insufficient staff training, limited digital literacy, and financial constraints. These challenges were also reflected in the libraries' communication methods. While most libraries maintained communication with their patrons via traditional methods such as notice boards and SMS, fewer utilized more

modern social media or email channels. This reliance on basic communication tools underscores the limitations in technological infrastructure and staff readiness to engage with more advanced digital platforms.

In terms of financial sustainability, many libraries experienced reduced funding allocations, which further hampered their ability to implement new services or adopt technology during the pandemic. Despite these financial challenges, libraries tried to alleviate the burden on patrons by writing off fines, which 80% of libraries took. This gesture eased financial pressures on patrons and demonstrated the library's commitment to maintaining its services, even under challenging circumstances.

Libraries also faced considerable operational challenges during the pandemic, including staff travel difficulties, difficulty maintaining social distancing within limited spaces, and difficulty ensuring adequate sanitation. These operational difficulties were compounded by a lack of sufficient staff to manage sanitation measures, with 45.16% of libraries reporting issues in maintaining cleanliness and hygiene standards. The challenges were also evident in the hesitation among staff to report to work (35.48%) and the widespread impact of staff or their family members being infected with the virus (58.06%). These factors significantly disrupted library operations and limited their ability to serve patrons effectively.

Despite these obstacles, libraries implemented several strategies to manage the challenges. Roster-based attendance systems, flexible working hours, and the establishment of sanitary and social distancing measures were some of the most common approaches adopted. These measures helped

ensure that libraries could continue functioning while protecting staff and patrons. However, the limited adoption of digital services, with only 10% of libraries implementing such measures, points to a critical area for future development. The pandemic has highlighted the need for libraries to invest in digital infrastructure, provide staff training, and develop strategies for delivering services through digital means in times of crisis.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented libraries in Sri Lanka with unprecedented challenges, many of which were compounded by preexisting limitations in infrastructure, staff training, and financial resources. However, the measures taken by libraries to adapt to the situation, such as roster-based attendance, flexible working hours, and communication with patrons, demonstrate their resilience.

Further, this study provides empirically based recommendations designed to guarantee the sustainability of libraries, enhance staff capacity, and facilitate uninterrupted access to information during potential future disruptions. Investment in digital infrastructure, broadening training programs, and building strategic partnerships with potential stakeholders are also essential to advancing inclusive, technology-driven library services in the post-pandemic era.

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