With Afghanistan’s educated class growing rapidly over the past decade while education resources remain scarce, there is an increasing need for a functioning public library system, AAN’s Qayoom Suroush argues. However, the only public library of Afghanistan’s capital – at the same time standing in for a non-existent national library – is not even close to functioning. The Kabul Public Library has a random collection of donated, often outdated books, no development budget and un-trained staff. Qayoom Suroush, who has tried several times to use the library for his university and AAN related research (with little success), has looked into why national and international attempts at increasing literacy in the country have not included the renovation and upgrading of public libraries. This should be a logical consequence of addressing illiteracy and raising education levels, he says.

In a small, dimly lit room of the Afghanistan’s Studies department at the Kabul Public Library (KPL), librarian Mosafer Kharoti is struggling to find a book a visitor has asked for. He walks up and down the aisles of shelves that hold thousands of books covered in dust. They deal, sorted
in no apparent way, with the country’s modern history, culture and literature, but also geography and natural resources. If Kharoti finds the book that was requested, it is because he somehow remembers having seen it before. There is no catalogue, although there are more than 6,500 volumes. Due to the lack of space, hundreds of them had to be shifted into the corridor.

This department is one of seven in the old two-story building on busy Malik Asghar Square, around 500 meters south of the presidential palace. It also has a so called “reference section” (which, according to the library officials, has 4,700 books that include interpretations of the Holy Quran, encyclopedias and world history books), a reading hall (with 20,000 books mostly on social sciences), a loaning section (2,500 wildly mixed titles, from novels to history books), a room with children’s books (7,899 volumes, most of them in English, Russian, German and French), a newspaper section, and a literature section (5,530 poetry books in Dari and Pashtu). Altogether, the KPL has, at least according to the figures the librarians give, 69,629 books on offer. For an Afghan library, many of which do not have more than 500 to 1500 books (more on that later), that sounds like a lot. In a paper on libraries available in the Afghanistan Studies department – “Historical Evolution of Libraries in Afghanistan” – author Ghulam Faroq Nelab Rahami wrote in 1982 that the library had initially, in 1966, been established under the slogan “Books For Everyone!” However, apart from this rather vague motto, there is nothing that would resemble a mandate of what the library is supposed to provide and for whom.

The KPL is also the only state-owned public library in Kabul and the oldest of the public libraries in Afghanistan. As such the KPL has another function. As long as Afghanistan does not have a national library, this house of books is supposed to stand in, as Hamidullah Shahrani, the head of the Kabul Public Library and also the head of Afghanistan’s Public Library Directorate, told AAN. However, the challenges are manifold. They have to do with running a library in a country with a high number of illiterate citizens (still only 45 per cent of men can read and 17 per cent of women), and they have to do with budget constraints, with a lack of capacity of staff and a general lack of a reading culture promoted in homes and schools.

Outdated collections

As the quasi-national library, the KPL should have the best collection of books in the country. In comparison with other public libraries, this might be true. However, its collections have gaping holes, and many volumes are in bad condition, with covers torn and pages warped, partly because of the poor quality of paper and printing, but also because of years of staff preparing food and tea amongst the shelves and in the corridors. The air is humid, with small electrical heaters doing their best to drive out the winter and spring chill during the days and the cold creeping back in through badly insulated doors and windows at night. The KPL does not have a proper climate control system.

The collections have been built over the years following no coherent system. Many titles available were once self-published books, often politically biased, and delivered by the authors themselves to be included into the collection. Looking at the Afghanistan Studies department
again, there are few recent titles and no subscriptions to academic journals. Probably the best collection of the library is the one of newspapers from the 1920s onwards.

Of new books, other than self-published ones, for example, international or Afghan academic titles, the KPL seldom receives copies, although today, more books are published and distributed in Afghanistan than at any time in its history (for more see here). This is also because it is hard to keep track of what comes on the market. Only in 2012 did the Ministry of Information and Culture establish a department, tasked with allocating the so-called International Standard Books Numbers (ISBN) to every book published in Afghanistan. However, because of what publishers say are technical problems, not all books printed get ISBNs. (1)

Another problem is the lack of a budget to purchase books. Except for the running costs, (2) the Afghan government does not provide any budget for the library to improve its collections. This means the KPL has to rely on donations of publishers and donor countries (see here). But donations usually create a randomness of collections, with irrelevant titles taking up space and discouraging readers from using the library (a phenomenon Afghanistan’s university libraries also suffer from; see a recent AAN report here). Library director Shahrani says many titles – particularly novels, history books or titles on Afghan culture – “have not been touched for the past decade.”

The visitor ‘experience’

Meanwhile, there is a growing educated class of young Afghans who urgently need better library services. In 2014, according to the Ministry of Higher Education, around 30,000 young Afghans graduated from public and private universities. In 2015, 55,000 new students have enrolled in public universities across the country (see AAN reporting here and here). And the number of high-school graduates applying for higher education by sitting the kankur, the university entry exam, is jumping up by the tens of thousands every year, with 300,000 having applied this year.

Most of the library’s visitors, the librarians say, are indeed students looking for material for their thesis and research assignments. One could question if a public library should fill the supply gaps university libraries are leaving. On the other hand, a solution for these undersupplied university institutions, for different reasons, would need to be rather complex (see this previous AAN report), and an official mandate for the public libraries is missing anyway. Why not make the provision of books for young students their main purpose? At least for now, they are filling parts of the gap in a practical and cheap manner.

The reading hall librarian of the KPL told AAN that “there are around 200 to 250 titles people regularly ask us for and that we do not have – particularly books on engineering, accounting, management, business, politics and economy.” Mohammad, a student, who is doing research on peace building attempts in Afghanistan post 2001, says, “Except for some poems, there is nothing here.” He knows that “there are hundreds of reports and books on peace building, also
in Dari, but the Kabul Public Library has none."

Experiences like this discourage first-time visitors from coming back, the librarians say in unison.

Another such experience is the lack of a catalogue that would help visitors find what they are looking for. As there is no internet, the KPL does not provide any online library service. Instead, visitors are supposed to use the card catalogue system. On the ground floor, right across from the main entrance, there are 30 small boxes holding cards detailing the titles of books as well as names of authors and publishers in alphabetical order. Three boxes are empty. Each of the other boxes contains around 100 cards, which means that, based on this catalogue, the KPL offers only around 2,700 books.

An alternative way is to ask the librarians, who then strain their memories. If the visitor is lucky, the librarian remembers the requested book’s location. However, most often librarians say, “Sorry, we don’t have this book.” With only 2,700 books registered, it is hard to say if the requested book really does not exist or if librarians just shy away from the cumbersome work of going to look for it. Unlike in Western public libraries, visitors of the KPL are not usually allowed to touch the books or wander around among the shelves to look for themselves.

*Lack of trained staff*

The problem also lies in the lack of training of staff. None of the 61 KPL employees has learned how to manage and maintain a library and its services – not even the head of Afghanistan Public Libraries, also the head of the Kabul Public Library, who is usually appointed by the Ministry of Information and Culture. None of the three directors within the past decade had professional training in library management. (3) In 2002 and 2003, the KPL saw some support from Iran’s national library. Some KPL staff was taken to Iran for courses for two weeks. However, as Royce Wiles, a library expert with extensive experience working in Afghanistan since 2002 (he, for example, built the library of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit AREU), says those short-term courses do not make for knowledgeable staff. In a paper for AAN, Wiles wrote

*The usual training period for a cataloguer in academic libraries is two years of hands-on training (after formal information management studies of some kind — either undergraduate or postgraduate). It is not possible to train anyone to enter standardised data for a library system in a week and expect it to work without considerable follow up.*

Staff of the Iran National Library also came to Kabul for some on-the-job training. But a KPL librarian told AAN that after a while the head of the KPL thought that, politically, it was “not good to rely on Iran” and thus “did not treat the Iranian staff working at the KPL well.” He added that “the Iranians did not come back.”

Within Afghanistan, there is no institute or faculty that teaches library management, neither at
public nor at private universities or higher education institutes. Both Wahid Wafa, the executive
director of the ACKU-library (Afghanistan Center at Kabul University), and Rebecca Miller, a
PhD librarian currently heading the library of the American University of Afghanistan (both
libraries and AREU being seemingly the only functioning ones in the country, also due to
international funding) (4), told AAN that they had repeatedly tried to convince Kabul University
officials to start a two-year library management course, but to no avail.

KPL staff is consequently paid for doing nothing. However, some of the librarians use their free
time to write theses for undergraduate students. During his research at the KPL, the author
overheard a conversation between a KPL librarian and a student bargaining about the price for
writing a monograph. The librarian said to the student, “It starts from 5,000 Afghani (around 90
US dollars) and for every citation you need, it will cost you an additional one thousand Afghani”
(meaning for every title the student is supposed to include as source; Afghan professors
usually detail how many, often also which, sources the student should read and quote.) They
agreed on 10,000 Afghani (around 175 US dollars).

All of this makes the KPL a quiet place. Few Kabulis come here. A good day sees 100 to 150
visitors. During the winter, when universities and schools are off, there is almost no one in the
rooms and halls. Altogether, the KPL has 1,375 registered members.

Interestingly, in 1977, with Kabul having no more than 500,000 inhabitants (today, there are
around five million), the number of registered members was more than ten times today’s figure
– at 14,000. The illiteracy rate in the country – albeit not in Kabul – was even higher than today,
at around 95 per cent. This shows how war, civil war and Taleban rule have not only impaired
much of the library’s physical structure, but also a culture of reading that, while rudimentary,
was there four decades ago in the urban areas. Even going to school and to university in
Afghanistan today, this author finds, there is almost no encouragement to read anymore, let
alone official programs promoting the value of written resources for life, learning, work or
leisure.

*Books looted, culture of reading eroded*

Some of this must be ‘credited’ to the destruction decades of war have brought.

The first Afghanistan Public Library was established in 1924 (during the rule of progressive King
Amanullah, 1919 to 1929) and was called Kitab Khana-ye Melli the “national library.” It was
opened to make a “collection of illuminated manuscripts collected by Prince Nasrullah available
to the public,” wrote Nancy Dupree, the founder of the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University
(ACKU) who has been working with libraries and written resources on Afghanistan for decades,
in an article for International Preservation News in July 1999. However, during the civil war of
1929 that resulted in the collapse of Amanullah’s kingdom, the library was looted and most
documents vanished (the full article is available in the ACKU library, a Dari translation is here).

The Kabul Public Library as it exists today was established in 1966 by integrating two small
libraries: the library of the Press Directorate and the library of the Ministry of Education (read here). A decade later, in 1977, a survey of Afghanistan public libraries by UNESCO estimated that the 32 Afghan public libraries (in 26 provinces and four in Kabul) offered 168,000 books. “Some 58,000 were located in the provinces, and 75,000 volumes in the four Kabul city libraries. A further 35,000 volumes ... have been supplied to prisons, industries and military establishments.” The four libraries in Kabul included the central one, “a nearby branch, a junior library, and the joint archive/manuscript library” (the latter is today’s Archive-e Melli, the National Archive).(5) By 1992, the number of libraries, at least according to this book, Damages to Afghanistan’s Culture by Kabul University professor Ismail Yun, published in 2008 in Pashto, had grown to 79, with 208,066 titles. There is no account, though, that would shed light on the quality or coherence of the collections.

During the communist regime, the libraries’ names changed – to “Kitab Khana-e Khalq” (library of the people), and the collections grew with books, magazines and newspapers on communism and Marxism. The civil war that followed the collapse of the communist regime in 1992 decreased their collections again. An unknown number of books was burned, stolen or smuggled outside of Afghanistan. One KPL librarian told AAN that mujahedin burned thousands particularly of the “red books.” According to Ismail Yun, around 67,000 books were lost from the KPL alone. Some of the staff, who already worked at the library then, still remember those days. One told AAN, “Sadeq Chakari was Minister of Information and Culture then. He gave the order to collect and burn the so-called “red books” (that included books, magazines, newspapers and any transcripts related to or reflecting the communist regime’s ideas and beliefs).

When the Taleban took control of Kabul city in 1996, they decreed that all printed material with pictures or paintings of living creatures on it should be burned, too. The Taleban believed that drawings of living creatures are non-Islamic (read here and here). (6) KPL librarians told AAN that Taleban did indeed come and ask for books of the ‘forbidden’ sort, but the head of the library convinced them to leave the library without burning books. Nonetheless, this report, “Rebuilding the Libraries of Afghanistan” from 2011, said that out of 18 libraries in Kabul, 15 were closed during the time of the Taleban.

International support for libraries – or the lack thereof

In the post 2001-period, there were attempts to revive the Afghan library system, but they were few and patchy, and there was never any grant or project that would have addressed all libraries and a countrywide system.

The largest one was, in 2003 and 2004, a UNAMA grant for the KPL of 200,000 US dollars, with three main goals in mind: rehabilitation of the physical facilities, addressing gaps in the equipment, such as furniture and book collections, and capacity building. Royce Wiles, who was an advisor to the project, remembers that he asked the then head of the Afghanistan Public Libraries to provide a list of their needs. “When we received it, there was everything on it from microwaves to refrigerators – but they forgot the books.” In the end, the UNAMA fund was used to build two rooms (today’s reference and literature sections) and the library’s garden. Also
furniture was purchased. No books.

In 2003, the UNESCO opened a public internet café with 12 computers on the ground floor of the Kabul Public Library, but the Ministry of Information and Culture handed it over to a private business man, and six months later the café was closed.

According to this report, there were also some Dutch consultants who tried to “introduce a computer cataloguing system and trained the staff in how to use it (who paid them seems to have been forgotten over time). Some 80 per cent of the library’s holdings were successfully computerized, the cited source said, but then the funding ran out and the system was abandoned in favour of the old manual catalogue card system.” The KPL librarians say, however, those consultants “did not even computerize one per cent of the books.”

To sum up, although there were some projects addressing public libraries, most of them were either never finished or unsustainable. The effort to computerise at least the KPL’s library system and digitalise books, the efforts to provide online services or, at the very least, the effort to equip the library with books, all failed. After a decade, the only lasting changes consist of a few new and a few renovated rooms, some new chairs and tables and security cameras in all rooms.

No books for public libraries – but plans for two national libraries?

However, the Afghan government has ambitious plans that go far beyond existing structures. On January 27, officials from the Ministry of Urban Development Affairs held a meeting to discuss building a National Library in Kabul’s Microrayon neighbourhood, on 32 jerib (one jerib is 2000 square meters). The Ministry’s website says that the construction of the library – which will cost 23 million US dollars – will start in 1394 (2015) and will be finished in 1397 (2018), with financial support from “Ministry of Finance and the donor countries and organizations.” But the National Budget of Afghanistan for the fiscal year of 1394 (2015) – anyway an ‘austerity’ budget due to the huge financial shortfalls of the past year (see for example here) – does not include any such project. The budget details only two development projects for the Ministry of Information and Culture (MOIC): construction work to improve the buildings of the Ministry in Kabul and provinces and restoration of antiquities in Kabul and provinces; both, in total, will cost 790,445 dollars (a large part of which has apparently been promised by the Japanese government).

However, it seems an odd decision to focus on such a luxury project while the same amount of money could help make the existing public libraries across the country a better place for many more young Afghans striving for education.

Conclusion

After a decade of getting children into school (7) and at least starting to eradicate illiteracy, it is time to go further. Focusing on public libraries seems no more than a logical consequence of
addressing illiteracy and raising education levels. Those who can read should have easy access
to written resources, for learning, work or – one day, hopefully – even for leisure. Public libraries
are the logical providers, as here books, usually too expensive for most Afghans, would be
available for free. Furthermore, public libraries are designed to offer wide ranges of material,
catering to all levels of Afghan society, from entertainment to academic work, from children’s to
adult levels. These libraries should be very practical. They should pick up urban and rural
Afghans where they stand and consider their needs – which, so far, they do not, aggravating the
lack of a reading culture by repelling the few new interested readers the past decade’s
education efforts have produced with badly maintained collections and few services.

The largest current need seems to be to provide university students with a broader range of
materials to learn with, on a number of topics, also partly picking up where university libraries
cannot yet deliver (and for some time to come). Future approaches should, particularly from the
side of the Afghan government, also include promoting a culture of reading, for example by
offering programs to children and parents. All of this would be of limited value without
establishing a library management institute or at least a course in library management for
training librarians – and of course regular investments in book drives for the ‘book houses’ of
the country.

(1) For example, Amiri Publishing House, as one the most the important publishers, has
published around 250 titles in the past decade and only 60 of them have an ISBN. Zaryab
Publishing House has published 30 titles and only 10 titles have an ISBN. The state publishing
house, Behaqi, has published around 120 titles in past decade and most of them do not have an
ISBN. For more see here.

(2) Neither the Kabul Public Library officials nor the ministry officials addressed were able to tell
AAN what exactly the running costs for the library are. The library does not have a finance
department.

(3) After 2001, the first head of the library was the late Ghulam Faroq Nelab Rahimi, who
worked as the head of the library for 11 years and held a BA in literature. His successor was
Abdul Hamid Nabizada who had worked in the library for more than 20 years (no background
given); the third and the current one is Hamidullah Shahranii. Prior to this position as head of the
public libraries, he was working with the Ministry of Higher Education.

(4) The Afghanistan Research and Evolution Unit (AREU) library has more than 16,000 titles on
Afghanistan and its catalogue “is fully searchable online.” The AREU’s Library is open to all
Kabul residents from 9 am to 4 pm, although most of the visitors are students and some foreign
researchers. ACKU was originally established by late Louis Dupree in Peshawar in 1989 (then it
was called ACBAR Resource and Information Centre - ARIC). In 2005, President Ashraf Ghani,
than chancellor of Kabul University, provided it temporary space in the university’s main library,
until ACKU's new building inside the university campus was inaugurated on 27 March 2013.
ACKU organises meetings and seminars and between its collection and archive it has around 100,000 titles fully researchable, and some of them also available, online. ACKU is open to all, but because of its location inside the gated university campus it is mostly the Kabul University’s students who benefit from it.

(5) In July 1973, when President Mohammad Dawood took power, his government included building six libraries in his Seven-Year National Plan, but with the collapse of the Dawood regime, the plan was never realized.

(6) There were, for example, reports that the Taleban burned down the Nasir Khusraw Library in the Pul-e Khumri district of Baghlan province. The library had been established by Sayed Mansour Naderi, the religious leader of the Afghan Ismaili community. In 1998, it allegedly had 55,000 books and was open to students and researchers (here and here). The library was originally located in Kabul, but with the rise of the Taleban, moved to Pul-e Khumri district, Baghlan province. The library was re-opened in 2012 in Kabul city.

(7) In 2001, fewer than one million children went to school. Since then, their number has increased to 8.5 million in 2012/2013 (5.2 million boys and 3.3 million girls). However, over one million of those enrolled are permanently absent. And still “only 55% of children of primary school age are attending school,” states the 2010/11 Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey. Find more in this UNESCO 2013/14 Monitoring Report.