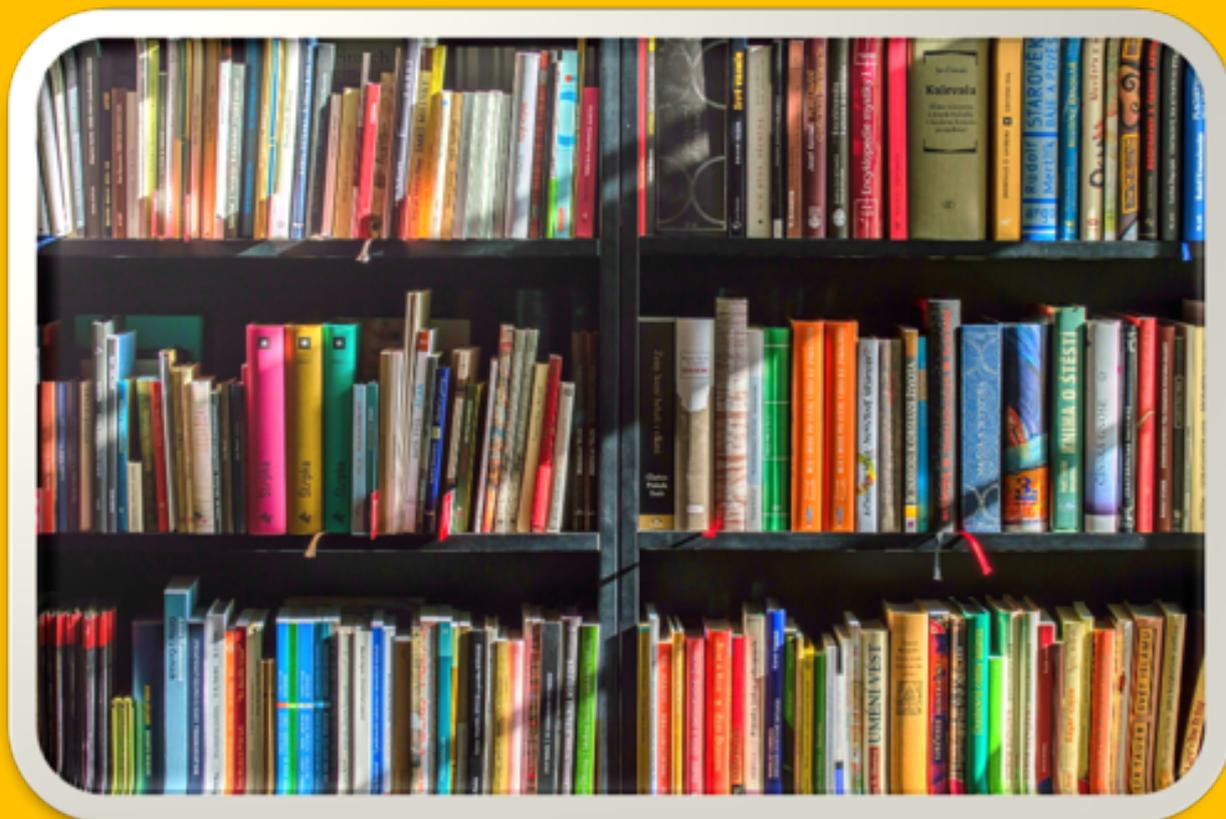


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Exit Strategy from Covid-19 for Libraries in Sri Lanka



NILIS

**National Institute of
Library and Information Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO**

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Exit Strategy from Covid-19 for Libraries in Sri Lanka

Prepared by the National Institute of Library and Information Sciences, University of Colombo, in partnership with the National Library and Documentation Services Board of Sri Lanka (NLDSB), Sri Lanka National Archives (SLNA), and the Sri Lanka Library Association (SLLA).

1. Introduction

It is commonly accepted that the Sri Lankan government along with the relevant health authorities and other partners have successfully taken steps to contain the community spread of Covid-19 virus so far.

However, it is also stressed that unless we take further preventive action the control may slip away. Therefore, it is the duty of all sectors of employment to decide on how to proceed during this period of caution.

Libraries are special places of public contact highly exposed to infections in general. Total number of libraries in Sri Lanka exceed 8000¹. However, their exposure to Covid-19 virus is different by the type of library, and contextual differences. Although the 1176 public libraries serve for all social strata, there are considerable differences in resources, staff, and readership². Demographics vary widely among different provinces. In this context, it would be difficult to execute a single recommendation that applies to all.

In addition, the response should be a dynamic process of evolving and responding to the changing circumstances³. It is impossible to develop a static or a rigid strategy⁴.

Therefore, while the scope of this document covers all types of libraries in Sri Lanka in all provinces which are (or in near future will be) in the process of re-opening, its scope is limited to an exit strategy from the effects of Covid-19. Our objective is to propose a strategy to open up to the level of full operations at the earliest time appropriate. This has to be achieved phase

by phase. The period of each phase will depend on the epidemiological data and government circulars issued from time to time.

It is also stressed that involvement of library and information professionals is necessary for planning and administration of libraries and information centers. Nonprofessionals may take inappropriate measures putting collections, staff and readers at risk.

2. Library opening

2.1 An island wide curfew was imposed in Sri Lanka from 20th of March with occasional relaxations, except for high risk zones. The country expects to open its regular services with prescribed controls from 11th of May 2020. This follows the request for employees in government and public establishments to return to work as determined by the relevant heads according to government regulations. The guidelines were broad, allowing respective organizations to decide on a workable plan.

2.2 Relevant library administrators should discuss and adapt the exit strategy considering the current situation and health advice. Once the decision is made to re-open libraries, necessary arrangements should be made to rearrange the office and service areas following the guidelines laid out in the Operational Guidelines on Preparedness and Response for COVID - 19 Outbreaks.

2.3 All branches should be considered separate entities for the purpose of applying the strategy mentioned here.

¹ *Statistical Handbook on Libraries in Sri Lanka*.

² Ruwan Gamage, "Baseline Report on Public Libraries in Sri Lanka."

³ Anderson et al., "How Will Country-Based Mitigation Measures Influence the Course of the COVID-19 Epidemic?"; Craven et al., *COVID-19*.

⁴ "GMOA Exit Strategy."

⁵ Anil Jasinghe, "Operational Guidelines for Work Settings."

- 2.4 Until it is announced that the Covid-19 threat has been eradicated from the world, all communities should avoid close contact with each other as much as possible. The relevant health advice should be followed.
- 2.5 A five phased exit strategy is recommended. The following phases are proposed after considering other advisories, circulars, and evidence from academic research. Please note that these phases are based on the current evidence. The phases may need to be divided into sub-phases depending on local requirements. In addition, if one phase fails, the library should decide to return to an earlier phase.
- 2.5.1 **Phase 0:** For a start, it is advisable to work according to the interim advice published by the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health⁶. It advises not to share books and equipment among stakeholders⁷. Therefore, it is suggested that this phase of opening should be limited to staff working inhouse, not functioning front desk operations.
- 2.5.2 However, online collections and services should be made available as much as possible. 'E' versions of books, magazines, newspapers, and e-audio versions can be promoted. The library Web site and social media should display this information. The contact details of a librarian should be made available and announced to all stakeholders⁸.
- 2.5.3 **Phase 1:** As the next phase of opening, it is advisable to start circulation of materials on prior appointment. A telephone, text based, or online method can be implemented to reserve books. Reserved books should be made available at the counter at the time assigned for the reader. Collections in the library should be made known to the relevant audience either in the form of an online catalog or a list of books as much as possible. Returns also can be limited, with restrictions on the number of persons who can enter into the library. Depending on the space available, the library should decide on how many users can stay inside keeping social distance. Separate check-in and checkout counters can be operated to avoid congestion. Library collections and equipment⁹ should be properly covered to prevent possible contamination. However, close supervision and daily maintenance is required.
- 2.5.4 In parallel with this, study rooms can be opened if these are situated separately from collections. Restrictions should be imposed¹⁰.
- 2.5.5 **Phase 2:** Using newspaper and reference collections, browsing of shelves, and using equipment can be opened to readers when it is confirmed that there are no reported cases of community spreading of Covid-19 in the area. A good time indication to implement this phase would be when the schools of the area are opened for students. Readers should be advised to clean hands before touching library materials. Sanitizers¹¹ or washing facility should be provided.
- 2.5.6 **Phase 3:** Services for children's can be started as the next phase. Health procedures recommended at the time by the Ministry of Education regarding schooling of children must be followed inside libraries as well.
- 2.5.7 Mobile libraries can be operated with caution, following the same procedure, adjusting the safety procedures as applicable to the context.

⁶ Anil Jasinghe. op. cit. p.19

⁷ This advice was specifically for Universities although it can be applied for all libraries.

⁸ It is necessary to employ a qualified staff member who can answer general and reference queries. It is also beneficial if that person has access to the Internet to search for viable answers.

⁹ Computers, scanners, headphones etc.

¹⁰ One-meter distance from each other and wearing of masks are necessary. Tables should be cleaned before inviting another member in.

¹¹ Please be reminded that alcohol-based sanitizers can be harmful to archival collections.

2.5.8 **Phase 4:** During the final phase all functions can be opened to all visitors when it is announced by the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health that the threat of Covid-19 is eliminated.

3. Safety procedures

- 3.1 Safety of staff as well as library visitors should be considered. Therefore, wearing a face mask is mandatory. Staff and visitors who do not wear face masks should not be allowed in. Staff and visitors should be advised not to visit if they have symptoms of infection and, to return home as soon as official duties of staff and needs of readers are fulfilled.
- 3.2 Handling of returns should be carried out as per the guidelines of the National Library and Documentation Services Board (NLDSB)¹².
- 3.3 Transparent partitions at counters could help reduce close contact between staff and readers.
- 3.4 If the library already has drop box facility, make it available at the entrance. If the library is automated without a drop box, ask the reader to self-check in.
- 3.5 When returns (or collection boxes) are directly handled, staff should wear gloves in addition to face masks.
- 3.6 If possible, move the service closer to the entrance area, demarcating entrance and exit routes, reducing waiting time.
- 3.7 Returning library resources could be infected. Therefore, appropriate measures should be taken to make sure they are safe for re issuing. It has been accepted that

isolation is better than direct disinfection with regard to books¹³. The maximum to near maximum¹⁴ time recommended in research on surface stability of the Covid-19 virus should be followed as the period of isolation¹⁵.

3.8 Elders are more prone to infection¹⁶.

Therefore, promote elders using the library from home, and if necessary to get the service through others.

4. Safety of library collections

- 4.1 While it is important to focus on current operations, libraries should take appropriate measures to protect the collections.
- 4.2 If the long period of closure has caused damage, appropriate measures should be taken for preservation and conservation of materials.

5. Sanitization and cleaning while in operation

- 5.1 It is recommended to measure body temperature at the entrance to the premises if possible. Also, a suitable sanitizer or, soap and water should be made available at the main entrance, and entrances to each building in the premises.
- 5.2 If the library has archival collections, it is advisable not to use alcohol-based sanitizers. Alcohol based sanitizers may harm paper¹⁷. Therefore, soap and water to clean and tissues to dry hands would be an alternative. Automatic dispensers can be installed.
- 5.3 A wastepaper bin with a lid and a foot peddle should be placed at places where a cleaning facility is available.

¹² NLDSB, "National Library Advisory (21.04.2020)."

¹³ "Covid-19 Basics."

¹⁴ Kampf et al., "Persistence of Coronaviruses on Inanimate Surfaces and Its Inactivation with Biocidal Agents"; Van Doremalen et al., "Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1."

¹⁵ Kempf et al have suggested 6 days of isolation. However, van Dormalen et al proposed that the

period of longest retention is 3 days. Both are recent studies with Covid-19 virus.

¹⁶ Gasmi et al., "Individual Risk Management Strategy and Potential Therapeutic Options for the COVID-19 Pandemic."

¹⁷ "The Impact of Hand Sanitizers on Collection Materials - Research Projects - Preservation Science (Preservation, Library of Congress)."

5.4 When tables are exposed to the public, remove additional materials kept on table surfaces. Frequently clean furniture for disinfection, at least daily before closing or opening. Disinfection on pre-scheduled days from time to time is also advisable. Announce these dates of closure to the public beforehand.

5.5 Mass scale disinfection methods such as Fumigation, Hydrogen Peroxide, UV radiation, etc. could either not be appropriate or cause damage to books and other materials. Make sure you get contextual advice from relevant authorities¹⁸.

6. Waiting for service and queues

6.1 As described above, admitting a limited number of readers into the library could be helpful. However, if you have a large library, you may need a waiting area. Be prepared for that if necessary. Try to utilize the open space, placing additional chairs if required.

6.2 Visitors in queues should be advised to follow distancing and other health standards.

6.3 Try to use the waiting time to educate visitors on disease control and related measures. Videos, posters, and other displays could be useful. Prevent distribution of handbills.

7. On detecting a suspected case

7.1 Staff or visitors may show symptoms of viral infection. Immediately follow the guidelines given by the health authorities in such situations¹⁹.

8. Overdues and fines

8.1 All libraries are advised to cancel fines that were being accumulated during the period

of closure. This decision should have been communicated to members, either as public notices or email and social media (if available). The Librarian should decide on a grace period to be implemented starting one week before closure, until such time the public can visit libraries without restriction.

9. Motivation of staff and relevant user communities

9.1 Libraries are cultural heritage institutions, as well as centers of collaboration and participation. Although the prevailing conditions require severe measures, we should try our best to continue services to respective communities. While the online medium is a possible solution, we should also facilitate the community to overcome psychological, economical, and social drawbacks. Innovative solutions could be proposed by the library administrators. Additional support can be obtained from NILIS, and partner organisations contributing to this work.

10. Conclusion

10.1 The pressure from the stakeholder communities to open should be balanced with policy level measures. Gradual and phased opening of services is necessary to prevent another catastrophe taking place.

10.2 Safety of staff and readers should be considered. Social distancing and wearing of masks should be mandatory.

10.3 Conservation of collections is necessary. Mass scale disinfection without a proper assessment of damages could be harmful.

10.4 Finally, this disaster has demonstrated the value of provision of online resources and services. Libraries should request support from higher authorities to integrate such services.

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¹⁹ Anil Jasinghe, "Operational Guidelines for Work Settings."

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