

The Changing Role of Community Libraries: – Emerging Centres for Sustainable Development

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the success stories and challenges of the READ (Rural Education And Development) program, which has been active in the building and development of community libraries in rural and remote areas in Nepal, and has established 53 libraries in different parts of the country. The paper will focus on how the role and the scope of these community libraries has been changing to meet changing needs in local communities and in Nepalese society at large, and how these libraries address the critical issue of sustainability. The community libraries serve many diverse functions and needs, being not simply venues for the reading and lending of books, but also community development centres with a strong focus on grass-roots education, empowerment and economic development.

In addition to providing an overview of the READ program, this paper will report on the outcome of focus group discussions with three community libraries that also function as community development centres, meeting local demand for literacy retention, livelihood promotion and community engagement. These three libraries highlight both the local practice and the grass-roots experience of making a community library a viable place to attain positive transformation, and of expanding the scope of what the library offers to meet the changing needs and priorities of its community.

READ Nepal was the recipient of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation “Access to Learning Award” (ATLA) in 2006 for its innovative approach to the provision and sustainability of community libraries. In addition, the Nepal Community Library Association, an association formed to develop community libraries, was the recipient library association in Asia of the IFLA “Building Strong Library Associations” program in 2011-12. In 2013, READ Global

has also been recognized by Lipman Family Prize¹ of the Wharton School and University of Pennsylvania.

Keywords:

Community Libraries, Sustainable Development, READ Nepal, Nepalese Libraries

Introduction

For the past 21 years, READ (Rural Education And Development) has been active in the building and development of community libraries in rural and remote areas in Nepal, and has established 53 libraries in different parts of the country. Over this time, the READ model for a typical community library has evolved so that they now include not only library services, resources and access to PC and Internet facilities, but also sections devoted to women's empowerment and early childhood development, and venues for community meetings and training. The community libraries thus serve many diverse functions and needs, being both venues for the reading and lending of books, as well as community development centres with a strong focus on grass-roots education, empowerment and economic development, creating hubs for life-changing, community-based activities and programs.

Through partnerships with various local NGOs and Government Organizations, READ libraries also provide programs on topics such as health education, literacy, women's empowerment, livelihood skills and more. In addition, a unique and defining element of the READ model is the creation of an associated "for-profit" sustaining enterprise for each library. These enterprises – chosen by the community and ranging from sewing centres to ambulance services to community radio stations – are managed by the local community and generate income to sustain the library in the long term.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the success stories and challenges of the READ program (which has since also expanded to India and Bhutan), to focus on how the role and scope of these rural libraries has been changing to meet changing needs in local communities and in Nepalese society at large, and to discuss how these libraries address the critical issue of sustainability. In addition to providing an overview of the READ program, this paper will report on the outcome of focus group interviews conducted with three community libraries which are also functioning as community development centres, meeting local demand for literacy retention, livelihood promotion and community engagement. These three libraries highlight the local practice and the grass-roots experience of making a community library a viable place to attain positive transformation, expanding the scope of what the library offers to meet the changing needs and priorities of its community.

Overview of the READ Program

¹ Wharton Award, available at <http://www.upenn.edu/pennnews/news/read-global-wins-100000-lipman-family-prize-wharton-school-and-university-pennsylvania>

READ is a non-profit organisation which partners with communities in rural Nepal, India and Bhutan to create vibrant places for people to live, learn and thrive. The READ model - proven and replicated over 21 years - focuses on the establishment of “Community Library and Resource Centres” (CLRC’s) which act as vehicles for social and economic transformation. Combining education, enterprise and community development, READ collaborates with rural communities to build these Centres, and to seed for-profit sustaining enterprises to ensure their long-term maintenance and success.

READ Centres are designed to serve whole communities, so that resources are available for all: – adults and children, students and teachers, the literate and illiterate. READ is revolutionizing the very definitions of library and outreach in communities that hunger for resources and greater empowerment by partnering with communities to develop self-sustaining library community centres (*Neuman, Khan, Dondolo 2008*). Each Centre provides at a minimum the following educational resources:

- A **library** with 3,000-5,000 books, magazines and newspapers in both English and the local language.
- An **information and communications technology (ICT) section** with computers, Internet access (where available) and computer skills training.
- A **women’s empowerment section** providing a safe space for women and girls to attend classes and training, and to undergo basic medical examinations.
- An **early childhood section** with child-friendly furniture, educational toys, and reading materials.
- A **multimedia and communications section** including TV, video, DVD player, telephone and fax.
- A **training/meeting hall** where staff and community partners and NGOs conduct various programs.

Ongoing training programs and workshops are an important component of the READ model, and the infrastructure provided in a READ Centre serves as a platform for the delivery of programs relevant to the needs of each community. In partnership with local NGOs and government agencies, READ implements various training programs at the Centres on topics such as literacy, livelihood skills, information technology, women’s empowerment and on health. For example, reading in the READ libraries is explicitly linked to programs for the development and retention of literacy skills, and to the acquisition of knowledge and skills by newly literate people to help them to become more economically independent, empowered and self-confident.

Community ownership and management is critical to the success of the READ model, and is instilled in every step of the typical five-year period of engagement with a community. Rather than READ identifying prospective sites for new Centres, the onus is on communities to approach READ with a proposal when they are ready to establish a READ Centre. READ seeks a co-investment from the community of at least 10-15% of the cost of establishing the Centre, typically made through a donation of land, a building to be renovated, through the community’s own fundraising efforts, or a combination of all three. As a result, the whole

community has both a financial investment in ensuring the success of the Centre and a personal stake in its use.

The READ experience has been that self-reliance and empowerment are the key ingredients to the success and sustainability of a Community Library and Resource Centre. As a result, at least one for-profit sustaining enterprise is launched with each READ Centre, so that the community has a regular income stream to cover the costs of maintaining the Centre in the long term. These sustaining enterprises also create local jobs and cement the Centre's position as a cornerstone of the community, further promoting its usage. Taken together, community ownership of the Centre and the sustaining enterprise create a powerful model for long-term sustainability and local entrepreneurship. As the Government does not financially support these CLRCs on a regular basis, sustaining enterprises help to generate a steady source of income which is contributed to the ongoing operating costs of the library.

The Changing Role of Community Libraries

In the course of its 21-year history of library projects, the READ experience has been that the community libraries have adopted different roles and services according to the changing needs and priorities of the people of their communities, as well as of Nepalese people in general. To explore the emerging roles of community libraries in relation to these changing needs, READ Nepal recently conducted focus group interviews with the managements and staff of three community libraries based in the central and western regions of the country. The main purpose of these discussions was to seek responses from the people involved in the running of these libraries on the following key questions;

- i. What were the programs originally undertaken by the community library? How were they implemented and why were these programs adopted?
- ii. What programs are offered by the library now, and why have they changed? How were these changes made and the programs implemented? Has the library's "definition" of its mission and role changed?
- iii. How effective was the sustainability program introduced to assist the library? What successes but also what challenges has the library faced?

The responses to the above questions from each of the three libraries interviewed is described in detail in the following case studies.

To have community perspective over the changing role of the libraries, the participants were selected on the basis of their duration of involvement with the library on different capacities as decision makers, staff or users. All the focus group discussions were carried on April, 2013.

Agyauli Community Library

Agyauli Community Library was established in 2000. This library is located in Western Development Region, Lumbini Zone and Nawalparashi District. It has been registered in District Administration Office. The library was established with 72% of READ's contribution and 28% of community contribution (excluding land). The catchment population of this area is 14535. The library has collaborated with 30 government and non-government partners till date. The literacy level of Nawalparashi District is now 72.8% (CBS Nepal, 2011)

The library is managed by Library Management Committee, which consists of 11 members, 8 being male and 3 being female. There are 7 subcommittees (Education, Publicity, Practical Answers, Fixture & Maintenance, Sustainability) consisting of 41 members in total, 36 of them are male and 5 of them are female. All the members in committees worked voluntarily, however, the dominance of male in decision-making level is dominant.

In Agyauli Community Library, the focus group discussion was carried out with 19 members, 63% of them were male and 37% of them were female. 42% of the total participants has been involved with library for more than 10 years, 26% of participants have been involved for 6 to 10 years and 32% of them have been involved from 1 to 5 years under different capacities as decision makers being the part of Library Management Committee members or members of subcommittees or as the staff or users. 63.2% of the total participants have experience being in different position in Library Management Committee and 26% of them served as staff for the library, 11 % are solely the users/beneficiaries. All the participants are also the users of the library.

The initial community impetus to establish the library was to address social issues to do with unemployed youth and old aged people, whose chief pastimes were gambling and playing cards. The vision in establishing the library was to help improve education levels within the community, and with this in mind the library conducted literacy classes, child education programs and other activities for youth, children and senior citizens. They provided library services for children, youth and senior citizens so that they can pass their time in library reading books than gambling. The choice of programs was decided through the library management committee meetings. As 75% of the library management committee were school teachers, a number of programs were devised for school children, such as sports competitions, quiz contests, debates and essay writing competitions. The committee collected most of the funds needed for these programs from local level organizations and with the support of READ Nepal.

However, the Agyauli library now runs a different range of programs focussing on; education (literacy classes on basic and advanced and early childhood development), health (health awareness activities and camps related to human health and animal health), ICT (basic computer training, access to email/internet), economic empowerment (savings co-operative and livelihood training related to agriculture) and social development (leadership building, gender and development, women's empowerment). Programs are now developed after a need has been identified through various participatory means such as direct discussion with the community, and focus group discussions with women groups and various groups. The library

now formulates a strategic plan after which an action plan is devised for each year. In the process of implementing various programs, new needs are identified. For example, through running health workshops the library became aware of the problems of uterine prolapse amongst local women, and as a result conducted more workshops specifically to address this issue. Many of these programs were organised and delivered through partnerships with government agencies and NGOs, such as the local Village Development Committee and District Education Office. The Agyauli library has also set up two satellite centres and two libraries to reach out to remote and underserved communities.

The Agyauli library has changed its focus in order to reach a wider audience of potential users. As time has passed the needs of the community have changed. Encouraged by the range of community awareness and information activities conducted through the library, the community has demanded more services. For example, after a women's co-operative was established, women in the area sought more information on health, parenting and reproductive issues. There have also been changes in the administration and management of the library. Whereas previously the library management committee had stipulated that only registered library users could access the library and its services, this has now been relaxed so that services are available to all members of the community, regardless of whether or not they are registered. In turn, the community has become more aware of the value of education, and now see the need for example for more skills in advanced farming methods, and the use of information technology in their lives. In the focus group interviews, the group responded that the way they view the library has also changed. They used to see the library as a storehouse of books, but now perceived it as a "social development organization", a "backbone of society", a "centre of knowledge and information" and a "lifelong learning centre". They now see the library as their common "platform" where all the community members can get together to address communal problems. The group reported that they had learned about the scope and potential of the library through the development and offering of different programs.

The library focus group regarded their main success so far has been that they have enabled over 1000 people in the area to achieve basic literacy, while many others have been able to retain their literacy skills through their use of the library. The community has both library books to use as well as activities designed to help them to increase their literacy skills. In the words of one local beneficiary of literacy classes at the Agyauli library, Chuna Devi Pangeni;

"I was totally illiterate. I did not even know how to write my name. I had to wait for months to find someone who can read letter from my husband. I had to wait for somebody to take my kids and me to hospital. I used to be dominated in home and society because I was illiterate. Now I know Nepali and some English. As I am more literate, I have a better position in my home and family. I am now respected by all because of the literacy training that I obtained. I now am confident and go where I need to and I like to"

Many farmers have also improved their income because of the library. For example, Til Bahadur is a successful farmer who earns an income from mushroom farming, a business he commenced after receiving training in mushroom farming from the library. Whereas previously many people in the community criticised the library, they now work together to

make it a successful organization. As a result of its endeavours, the Agyauli library has won an EIFL international award ² for promoting equitable access to information services, improving farmers' yields and livelihoods. Nonetheless, the focus group reported that the main challenges they face is that the needs of the community continue to increase day by day, and there are insufficient resources to conduct every program demanded of them including human resource skilled in the management of the library.

The sustaining enterprise of Agyauli library is income derived from the rental of storefronts which are built into the library's ground floor. These rentals generate approximately 19500 Nepalese Rupees per month, and are used to support the library's operating costs., their monthly expenditure, as they mentioned is same as income. For most of the programs described above, the library partners with various organizations such as the District Education Office, the District Livestock Office and an organisation known as Practical Action. However, the library feels that the current situation is not fully financially sustainable, as it is not able to meet every demand raised by the community despite feeling a responsibility to attempt to do this.

Jhuwani Community Library

Jhuwani Community Library was established in 2000. This library is located in Central Development Region, Narayani Zone and Chitwan District. It has been registered in District Administration Office. The library was established with 31% of READ's contribution and 69% of community contribution (excluding land). The catchment population of this area is 35000. The library has collaborated with 34 government and non-government partners till date. The literacy level of Chitwan District is now 78.9% (CBS Nepal, 2011)

The library is managed by Library Management Committee, which consists of 15 members, 10 being male and 5 being female. There are 6 subcommittees (Women, Agriculture & Livelihood, ICT, Education, Children and Community Solutions) consisting of 23 members in total, 26% of them are male and 74% of them are female. All the members in committees worked voluntarily.

In Jhuwani Community Library, the focus group discussion was carried out with 22 members, 68% of them were male and 32% of them were female. 23% of the total participants has been involved with library for more than 10 years, 27% of participants have been involved for 6 to 10 years and 50% of them have been involved from 1 to 5 years under different capacities as decision makers being the part of Library Management Committee members or members of subcommittees or as the staff. 55% of the total participants have experience being in different position in Library Management Committee and 27% of them served as staff for the library, 18 % are solely the users/beneficiaries. All the participants are also the users of the library.

The Jhuwani Community Library was established in 2000 in the Bachhauli VDC of Chitwan district in the southern plains of Nepal. The community youth group of the area had two

² EIFL Innovation Award; Available at <http://www.eifl.net/news/four-libraries-win-eifl-plip-innovation-award>

ambitions at that time, which were to build a bridge over the neighbouring river, and to build a library for the community. The first priority was to build the bridge, because without it local villagers had great difficulty in moving back and forth to their land, and during the rainy season crossing the river was a dangerous and occasionally fatal undertaking. So the youth built the bridge, and then began building the library with leftover construction materials. Their relationship with READ Nepal commenced shortly thereafter.

When the Jhuwani community first commenced the building of the library, they received no technical assistance of any kind and did not even have a single staff member. Then, they came into contact with READ, which supported the building of the library. The library began with programs such as a quiz contest, the celebration of women's day, a blood donation program and a dental camp, along with basic library services such as providing books and newspapers. These programs were almost exclusively donor driven, as the library welcomed any donor who was prepared to support them in some way. All programs were conducted by local volunteers.

Since then, the programs undertaken by the Jhuwani Community Library are done on the basis of identified need. The library now maintains a variety of programs in areas such as; educational development, health awareness and HIV/AIDs awareness programs, and women's empowerment and livelihood opportunities. It conducts non-formal education and reference services for school students and helps to support the establishment of local school libraries. In addition, there are computer programs for local youth, special programs for women - for example women's health programs and savings and credit co-operatives - as well as different income generation training programs such as mushroom farming, bee keeping, and off-season vegetable cultivation. Their "Practical Answers" project helped to find out local needs and concerns, and to steer the development of future programs. Almost all of the programs are delivered on a partnership basis and so far Jhuwani has worked with over 34 partners in the provision of community programs. The Jhuwani library has also set up three satellite centres and three school libraries as an outreach program to underserved areas.

The programs undertaken in the library have continued to change because of greater demands raised by members of the community, who began to seek more programs on health, livelihood and ICT training. As government bodies were not so active in providing services to the community, the community relied on the library to do the programs for them. Local donors learned to trust the library and helped them deliver more programs. The Jhuwani library also conducts many programs aimed at bringing women into the library, and before this, local women used to think that the library was not a place for them. The library also benefitted from exposure and technical support provided by READ Nepal, helping the library management to develop more programs needed for the community.

During the focus group interview, the Jhuwani group felt that their view of the library had changed over time. Previously, they used to see the library simply as a place for books. Now – with so many additional programs operating – the group felt that the library had become an "...umbrella of information", a "...social development organization", a "...solution of the

community” and a “...storehouse of knowledge and information”. In terms of successes, the group expressed their satisfaction that they now have their own infrastructure to provide the range of services that the community needs: – the library section, computer section, women’s section, audio visual section and two meeting halls to conduct programs. Community ownership of and investment in the library is very high at Jhuwani, and this has contributed to its sustainability. The participation of the community is also very high, as programs are offered for all sections of the community, irrespective of caste, creed, ethnicity, sex and age. Each and every household of the Jhuwani community has a story to tell about how they have benefitted from the library. The President of the library committee reflected that “...our library has been successful in doing programs for the people, by the people and with the people. Our library is trusted and loved so much by our community.” Partly on account of this, the Jhuwani Community Library has received awards for excellence in service provision from READ Nepal, in addition to becoming a “Beyond Access”³ member. This national and international attention has helped Jhuwani library to attract more partners and to capture the attention of the government. On the other hand, as with Agyauli library, the main challenge faced by the library is to meet the increasing demand of its community. The library also needs more skilled human resources to manage the programs. As the role of library grows and changes, people need to acquire the relevant skills.

The Jhuwani library has a mobile telecommunications tower, an ambulance, and guest rooms for rent as sustaining enterprises. The library is also working with many local and national level partners. However, the library group interviewed thought that they are not fully financially sustainable because they are not able to cater to the increasing demands of the community. Their monthly income now is NRs. 37500 and expense is NRs. 13305. In the group interviews, they expressed the view that they needed more resources and regular support from the government.

Deurali Library

The Deurali Library was established in 2011 as a satellite centre of the Agyauli Community Library (which now serves as a hub for several centres). In the satellite centre model, the smaller library provides outreach services to more remote and underserved populations, while also having a high level of integration with the programs and resources provided by the main hub.

This library is located in Western Development Region, Lumbini Zone and Nawalparashi District. It has been registered in District Administration Office. The library was established with 74% of READ’s contribution and 26% of community contribution (excluding land). The catchment population of this area is 18914. The library has collaborated with 20 government and non-government partners till date. The literacy level of Nawalparashi District is now 72.8% (CBS Nepal, 2011)

³ Beyond Access; Available at <http://beyondaccess.net/blog/2012/07/16/beyond-access-member-profile-jhuwani-community-library/>

The library is managed by Library Management Committee, which consists of 11 members, 7 being male and 4 being female. There are 8 subcommittees (Education, Sustaining, Youth & Sports, Women & Children, Publicity & Advertisement, Practical Answers, ICT, Fixture and Maintenance) consisting of 77 members in total, 66% of them are male and 34% of them are female. All the members in committees worked voluntarily.

In Deurali Community Library, the focus group discussion was carried out with 14 members, 8 of them were male and 6 of them were female. Since it was established recently, we discussed with all the members involved since foundation period. 85% of the total participants have experience being in different position in Library Management Committee and 14% of them served as staff or Consultant for the library. All the participants are also the users of the library.

As this library was established through the Agyauli Library, it conducts a range of similar activities, with many of the activities being extended services of Agyauli. Deurali library now has programs in non-formal education, computer classes, livelihood training and women's empowerment. A member of the Deurali community shared that "...after the candle making training provided by the library, I borrowed funds from the library and now I am a local businesswoman. I have started earning for the first time in my life." The library management committee meets directly with the community in order to identify what types of program to launch. This is further co-ordinated with the Agyauli library, to bring in additional resources and to provide opportunities for the community to learn how to provide similar programs.

Currently, the Deurali library is focusing on attracting more people, and as a result are engaged in activities designed to encourage greater participation, such as celebrations for the Teej (women's) festival, and programs such as health camps. The Deurali focus group perceived the library as being the local development centre, committed to continuing to meet users' needs. They said that the library is a "...knowledge centre for all sections of the community". Amongst their successes, the library claimed to have help achieve a 100% literacy rate in one of district wards within their coverage area, and has also conducted a successful program on uterine prolapse cases in women. The Deurali library is receiving immense support from the local community and from Agyauli library, as a result of which the library is moving towards greater success. The main challenge that the library faces is that it is struggling to become financially sustainable, as a sustaining enterprise for their centre has only just been launched. The library is running a turmeric farming enterprise in 1.36 hectares of land donated by the local community forest group. In the focus group, it was reported that some people within the community still have negative feelings towards the library.

Success Factors of the READ Program

The READ libraries have been successful in four major ways. These are;

Functionality of the CLRCs: For an institution to be able to make a contribution, it is important that a considerable degree of functionality is maintained. It is essential that timely and adequate services which are relevant to the recipient are provided. There is adequate demand and utility of the services which is being provided effectively. The CLRCs undertake innovative approaches and have developed a number of local level partnerships to strengthen their services. The centres are managed by locally elected /nominated steering committee. The

steering committee is assisted by different sub committees under different program areas. All the committee members work voluntarily for the library. The centres are also locally registered in District Administration and is affiliated to Social Welfare Council, the government wing of Nepal.

Community ownership: For change to truly take place, ownership and control must be with the local actors. Thus the success of a library is contingent on the level of participation and ownership of its community. With at least 10 to 15% contribution by the local community to build the library, is generating community ownership. So, in addition to assessing the 'functionality' – that is, what services are being provided - it is also important to assess how they have been provided, to whom and by whom. The CLRCs' initiatives are designed for engaging the communities and stimulating participation and ownership in the libraries.

Sustainability: For a lasting impact, it is important that the initiative is self-sustainable. It is important for the local community to manage and maintain the initiative on its own for a long time. Sustainability is maintained by three major components: - physical sustainability is ensured when the library has its own infrastructure, social sustainability is ensured when the library has maintained social trust, linkages and partnerships with local organizations, and financial sustainability is ensured by sustaining enterprises and partnerships.

Integrated development: As envisaged by READ, the libraries are not just reading rooms but in fact community resource centres which can play a vital role in the development of the community itself. The libraries are having an impact on the development of education, livelihood opportunities, community engagement and women empowerment in the communities they serve.

Challenges

The libraries developed under the READ banner are also presented with some significant challenges. These are;

Meeting the demand of local communities – As the library grows, the expectations of the communities also expand. Consequently, it is difficult to find the resources to match this growing expectation.

Role of librarian – The librarian has a very important role to play in the community. It has been difficult to identify what kind of skill sets is needed by the librarian, and it is also difficult to find the right librarian with the right skills. READ is not able to give relevant skills and trainings to the librarian with increasing services that the library need to offer.

Role of library – Most organizations do not support the library as their priority. They think of the library in a traditional sense, where they believe it is only a space for reading. They do not believe that the library can also be a community development centre, and consequently to acquire more resources for the community libraries has been difficult.

Conclusion

The research in this paper - conducted through focus group discussions with local communities - has attempted to identify the community's involvement in and response to the changing programs in the library. The research has found that community libraries have grown in appreciation in the eyes of the community, and that in general the demand for the library's activities has increased as the library has diversified to include more issues such as economic empowerment and livelihood training. Moreover, members of the community have themselves demanded new programs after noticing the expansion of the library, and thus have been actively involved in the process of expansion of the library. Thus, the community is responding positively to the surveyed libraries through the understanding that the libraries are more than just centres for casual reading and literacy, and that they can address other social issues as well and become sustainable vehicles for social change. This paper finds that the community libraries are also changing with the times, promising that they remain dynamic sites for social change and progress depending on the various needs of the local community members in the future.

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