

2013 Mortenson Center Distinguished Lecture

Mortenson Center for International Library Programs

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Community Libraries as Platforms for Sustainable Development

It is my immense pleasure to be here in the University of Illinois and to be a part of the 23rd Annual Mortenson Distinguished Lecture program to share my experience on “Community Libraries as Platforms for Sustainable Development.” I convey my sincere thanks to the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs, especially to Barbara Ford and Susan Schnuer for giving me this wonderful opportunity.

I am very fortunate to be here to share my inspirations, and I hope our experience mobilizing community libraries to make a great impact in low resource environments would be of interest for you. Though we work in three countries (India, Nepal and Bhutan), my lecture mostly reflects my own experience in Nepal as I have been involved for 10 years working for Nepali rural communities through READ-supported community libraries.

I am from Nepal, a small land-locked country located in South Asia. Nepal is known as the land of Mt. Everest and the birth place of Lord Buddha. It is bordered by China to the north and by India to the southeast and west. The country has extreme variations in topography and climate. The altitude ranges from 70 meters to 8848 meters within a 200 km span from south to north and the climate varies from tropical to polar.

Nepal is one of the least developed countries of the world. The total population is about 26 million and one fourth of population lives below the poverty line. Per capita GDP in Nepal is USD\$700 (World Bank 2012). The country has a shortage of infrastructure such as transportation and communication that has severely limited its economic opportunities. According to the Nepal Living Standard Survey 2010-11, Nepal has an adult literacy rate of 56.6%, with a huge disparity between males and females. The male

literacy rate is 71.6% whereas female literacy rate is just 44.5%. One of the main reasons behind this disparity is cultural: sons are still considered future caretakers of their parents, while daughters are thought of primarily as someone given to another family at the time of marriage. More recently, 17 years of political conflict has hindered the development of Nepal to a great extent.

I would now like to take you through my journey working in the field of libraries. 10 years back, I was involved in a three-year project related to the political empowerment of women in which I was responsible for empowering rural women by involving them in savings and credit cooperatives, encouraging them to independently be in charge of their livelihood and helping them to be leaders regarding women's issues in their societies. After completing this project, I was offered a job in READ Nepal – but I was reluctant to accept this job because this job was related to the library. In my view, the library was just a house of books, newspapers and other reading materials. I thought that only students, teachers and the literate population used it. To me back then, the library was a setting for people who already had the knowledge and abilities to make changes in their lives. But I wanted to work for deprived illiterate women, for poor farmers who did not have updated skills, information or access to financial resources. I wanted to help disadvantaged people substantially by continuously engaging them in relevant livelihood promotional trainings, such as cash-crop farming.

I wanted to help do early childhood education, which would enhance the learning capacity of poor children who do not have access to good schools or even to schools in general. I wanted to work in meaningful projects that would bring real, positive changes in the lives of the poor and rural people.

And now here I am at READ because community libraries turned out to be the place for whatever I could dream of achieving in the field of social service. Not only have my hopes of doing ground-level, grassroots work been quenched, but I have also realized the operations that READ performs with the community in order to enhance the community's own level of expertise to increase community engagement to build their own future. READ has been in operation in Nepal for more than 21 years. We have

constructed and witnessed libraries as catalysts for community development. It provides need-based services to children, youth, elderly citizens, men and women irrespective of age, class, creed, caste, ethnicity, and most importantly, their level of literacy. READ's program ranges from access to information and knowledge, literacy development, livelihood promotion, women empowerment and early childhood education.

I would like to tailor my lecture according to the given title –“Community Libraries are Platforms for Sustainable Development.” “Sustainability” is at the heart and soul of our model and we consider sustainability, both of our libraries and of a good quality of life of the people we attempt to impact, very integral to what we do. I will now walk you through the process of how we come to a community.

We support a library after we get a request from the community and after we ensure that there is a need for a community library - (which means we make sure that there is no other institution providing services that the library can provide in a particular location). Once the community decides that they need a library, the community forms an “inclusive” ad hoc committee to approach READ. READ ensures that there is widespread community interest for the library. READ provides training to the ad hoc committee on how to develop a formal proposal, which initiates their serious commitment towards the library. READ does not support 100% of the funding, so the community needs to contribute at least 15% of the total funds. As libraries need to cater different programs on literacy, health and women empowerment, etc. - collaboration and partnership with concerned organizations is very essential in order for the programs to be relevant and effective. Before beginning construction of the library, we also encourage the Library Management Committee (LMC) to get a commitment letter from governmental and non-governmental organizations working on health, agriculture, livelihood promotion, etc.

The other aspect in which we do intensive research during this proposal writing phase is identifying viable businesses which can generate sufficient income for the library to meet its operation costs. After assessing the need, proper location, community contribution and commitment, and viable business for the sustainability of the library, READ decides to support the community library project.

We sign the agreement for the library not in our office but in the community, in front of a gathering of community members, which also includes representatives from local level organizations. The funding sources of the library are made transparent to everyone in the community. The community starts contributing to the establishment of the library from this day onwards. To meet the committed contribution from the community they do different local fundraising events. I am often asked if it is difficult to raise money and encourage contribution in poor, rural communities, but I can tell you that it is possible. Our communities have contributed up to 60% of the total contribution.

To illustrate how the community raises its funds, I can give you the example of “Dhanyanchal,” which is one of the local fundraising campaigns the communities do. The term ‘Dhanyanchal’ – Dhan means rice and anchal means hill – so, hill of rice. This is basically a religious event where well-known religious songs and stories are chanted for about 7 or 9 days. All the community people get together from inside and outside the village and donate rice, any agriculture products or money. In Harnari, the communities raised NRs. 6,500,000 (US\$86,666) through this campaign to build the library in their community and in Rameshwor, the communities raised NRs. 8,300,000 (US\$110,666) for the library. This event demonstrates that we ensure that all the families in a community contribute something to build the library. They can donate some money or even some agriculture products that they have. At the end of a fund raising ceremony, they can sell their products, raise money and invest that in the library. If everyone is involved in the library building process right from the start, community ownership and participation tends to be very high in the long run which contributes to the sustainability of the library. We engage people as citizens (rather than as clients) in the development of the library and in promoting empowerment.

As I have mentioned above, each library has its own sustaining enterprises which generate income to meet the operation costs of the library. For example, storefront rental of Lekhnath Community Library in Kaski earns a monthly income of US \$320, community radio of Laxmi Memorial Community Library in Syangja earns US \$1600/month, Ura Centre’s tractor earns US \$350/month, Furniture Factory of Thak

Community Library earns US \$325/month. Although these are the sustaining enterprises in operation currently, there are also some cases where the sustaining enterprises that seem feasible today might not be feasible tomorrow, and so we build the capacity of communities to keep thinking of new ideas for new enterprises. In this way we emphasize the need of always having an operating sustaining enterprise to ensure that our libraries serve everyone well today and in the future.

We also focus on building the managerial capacity of locals to ensure the sustainability of our libraries. All READ libraries are managed locally. 9 – 15 members (that can be elected or nominated by the community) comprise the library management committee and they have different sub-committees of leaders on different programs. For example, they have a children's service subcommittee, women empowerment subcommittee, fundraising subcommittee, etc. The libraries have about 40 members on average in the committees and subcommittees working as volunteers. These committees help to identify and analyze the community's successes in organizing around the different issues such as women's empowerment and help to strengthen people's confidence in their capacities to take further action. The fact that the community libraries is not only *for* the people but also created *by* the people has promoted a strong sense of ownership and a strong commitment towards sustainability.

Our libraries have space for everyone in the community – for students and the literate and newly literate populations, we have a library section which consists of more than 60% of books in local language relevant to the community, local and national newspapers, and special collection of books for newly literate people. We have books which teach how to write meeting minutes, how to calculate and do savings, books chronicling the case studies of successful women and books on basic health and sanitation. The audio-visual section provides services for everyone, including illiterate people who can gain information from viewing CDs and documentaries. The children's section is comprised of books and learning materials for children. Children love to come to the library. Once I asked the librarian to send data on how many children visited the libraries, and they sent us this picture, as if to say that the enthusiasm of the local children to come to the library was so great that they lost count of how many visited the

library. An equipped meeting hall provides the locals the place to meet and discuss plans and programs regarding social development. Various trainings are also conducted in the meeting hall. The computer section provides basic computer courses and free access to the internet. The women's room provides a safe space for women where they can frequently meet and discuss their issues, then launch into programs that advocate for equal rights. The community members know what to do and how to provide services to their community. Community leadership in the library fosters innovative gestures that show both care and creativity.

The other important thing that contributes to sustainable development in the local communities is services provided by libraries in partnership with different organizations that are based around that locality. The library management committee identifies needs and looks for partnerships to meet those needs. Libraries partner with different local and national level organizations working on literacy, health and livelihood. READ's program addresses illiteracy, poverty and gender inequality. The library leaders are the main actors who address each of these problems. Both READ and the library's leaders believe that people are already learners and that they need locally relevant material to facilitate further learning. For example - after women get basic literacy courses, the library provides her with the space for her continued learning process. She can access books she is interested in, and she can have books for her children which she can read out loud for them. The woman can be involved in saving and credit cooperatives where she can learn financial literacy and basic calculations, and she can have training on potato farming, for instance, and read and use the information on that topic from the library.

This series of opportunities for the library users will help to continuously build their capacity to make them life-long learners, and thereby enable them to learn as well as help the library in the long run. Yes, the libraries get so careful in providing innovative services to everyone that I was once surprised to learn that library organized an "animal" health camp where all the farmers can bring their livestock and experts go to that place to treat the livestock that have different diseases, as if to suggest that not even the animals of the locals are left behind. Now they are even planning to do a "plant clinic", and it shows us how careful and detailed they get in providing the most amount of time,

energy and the most relevant services for the community members each time they do an activity.

Research done by “International Reading Association” in Nepal’s libraries mentioned that community libraries that provide the community with literacy programs is intimately tied to the educational, social and economic development of that community. It further stated that the READ model is based on asset-building community development. The model places a high priority on collaborative efforts between READ and the community, as well as between community members themselves. By providing a rural community with a community library, READ provides the platform, social institution, and a “safe space” for the social capital existing in a particular community to come together to engage in productive initiatives for community development.

I will now provide few examples that show how the different components in a community library are able to improve the quality of life of different members of the community. Dol Kumari Sapkota, now 39 years old, was married when she was only 9 years old. She gave birth to her first son at the tender age of 14 and after 2 years her second son was born. She suffered from uterine prolapse because she got pregnant at a young age and because of excessive work during her pregnancy. However, due to shame associated with socio-cultural reasons, she didn’t share her health condition with others. She had a hard time doing household chores and working in the field. As her condition got worse, she felt uncomfortable while walking, sitting and moving. She lived with this pain for 25 years.

When a health camp was organized at Jhuwani Community Library in March 2013, she was one of 87 women who had free health check-up. She was diagnosed with third degree uterine prolapse and was referred to the hospital for an immediate surgery. Though hard to believe, she lived with the disease for 25 years and yet her family members were unaware of her situation.

She had a successful operation at the local hospital. The hospital provided her with free service. After receiving free surgery and medicine from the hospital, she is very happy

these days. Thanking Jhuwani Community Library and Maula Kalika Hospital, she says, *“I am feeling good after the operation. I now have a completely new comfortable life. I am relieved of the burden that I had been carrying for 25 years. I am enjoying my life now.”* Now, she educates her neighbors and other women about uterine prolapse and suggests them to visit the hospital regularly. Now her good health and education have combined to make her a leader of other suffering women in the community. One of our goals is to ensure that women are fit enough, mentally and physically, to empower others less fortunate than them.

Kausalya Danuwar, aged 30, is a user of library in Sarlahi district. 10 years ago she went to Kathmandu (the capital city of Nepal) to work as a domestic helper. She earned NRs 700 (\$8.2) per month which did not pay for her living. While dealing with this financial constraint, her interest grew in tailoring and hence she joined the tailoring class. But being illiterate, she could not take measurements or do basic calculations. Her tailoring master yelled at her and refused to teach her how to do tailoring. He expected a certain level of literacy from her in order to teach her new skills.

After coming back to Sarlahi, she got married and had a son. But, her husband married another woman, so she is staying at her parent’s home now. When she came to know about Grihini School (Housewives education) at Chaturbhujeshwor Community Library, she joined the class. She also joined the tailoring class at the same time. Now she runs a tailoring shop at her home and studies in Class 10.

In three years, she has brought 3 sewing machines worth Rs 10,000 (\$117) each. She earns a monthly income of NRs. 12,000-15,000 (141\$- \$176). Despite being a single mother, she sends her son to private school (private schools in Nepal provide good quality education compared to government schools) with the money she earns. Now her son studies in class 6. She has been earning for 6 years and she has a saving account of Rs. 70,000 (\$824) in the bank. *“I gained literacy skill at the library which helped me to join tailoring class. Now I am financially independent and my son goes to private school”*, she says. She also teaches tailoring skills to other girls in her village and is helping other village women become empowered and encourages them to join literacy classes,

regardless of their age. The women who benefit from literacy classes in the library become the voice for the community library, speaking to the wider community about the importance of education for all – for themselves and for their children.

Sadana Panta, 23, is a permanent resident of Chiti VDC, Lamjung district of Nepal. Coming from a middle class family background, she looked for a job after completing Bachelor's level study. Despite her genuine wish to get a job, she remained unemployed for many months. She was not in a position to run her own business. Disappointed in life, she lost hope of getting a good job and hence, spent her days doing household chores like other women in her village.

But Sadana was a regular visitor of Laxmi Narayan Community Library. After coming in contact with the library, her general knowledge, public communication skills and networking improved. She also got the opportunity to enroll in a 3-month Hand Embroidery training offered at the library for free. Being a quick learner, after the training period, she became a trainer. Now she is a busy embroidery trainer who not only trains the women of Lamjung but also trains the women in other districts of Nepal.

Working as a trainer, she makes an average income of NPR 15,000 (US \$ 176) per month. Happy with the earning, she says, "I am happy to be a trainer." Remembering her bitter experience in the past, she says, "People laughed at me when I was jobless. They thought I could not do anything in life. They said girls can do nothing even if they are educated. Now, I have proved them wrong and this has been possible only due to Laxmi Narayan Community Library." The people who ridiculed her earlier have become positive towards her and have started to respect her profession as well. With a new skill and job, she has become more confident and independent. She supports her family financially, which has gained her respect in her family and village. She has become a role model for all other women in her village.

In a village community, being uneducated is just one of the hurdles towards improving one's quality of life. The sheer lack of opportunities, even for the educated, can make education pointless and discourage others to educate themselves. A community library

such as ours combines education with economic opportunities, so that education can be applied. Even those already educated like Sadana can come to the library to find information on economic opportunities. The jobless can find employment first and convince others to receive education like they did, as they can then rely on the library for additional support after receiving an education as well.

I am going to recite one poem which was written by Sita Poudel who was totally illiterate before. She had to face many hurdles and disrespect because she was an illiterate woman. Because of Laxmi Narayan Library she is literate now and she has started writing about her own experience. She showed her art to me shyly and asked whether this was readable.

I cannot see my inner eyes (she is referring to her lack of knowledge)

It's all dark...

I can see with my outer eyes

But nothing makes sense...

During my school going age

I cried and went herding cattle

During my productive age

I was in the prison of husband's house

Throughout my life I cried starving for study

Tried to write words many times

But was only able to draw lines

She is now a confident trainer for women's empowerment. Libraries have shown positive ways out of feelings of weakness to many women like Sita in the rural communities of Nepal, India and Bhutan.

Since the library is such a new institution in rural Nepal, it would be interesting to ask the community members the definition of library. As the library has been their change agent,

they called the library their “parents”, “solution”, “home”, “guide”, “soul”, “teacher”, “temple” and “heart of my community.” This shows that the library has managed to bring great change to the community despite being such a new institution.

The external evaluation of the READ program we did in 2011 reveals that libraries have been a vehicle for social transformation. Communities have responded that a library, as an institution, links with knowledge, and brings high esteem and credibility to a community. In Hindu culture, knowledge has always been respected as a valuable and powerful resource. The reflections of the respondents show that a library, by virtue of being associated with knowledge as sacred resource, is highly regarded and valued. The library is perceived as a “sacred place,” having the potential to guide and transform one’s world. It is a righteous agency, which could never harm but always brings benefits and liberates those use it. Therefore, any initiative led or promoted by the library is likely to be accepted and supported by the community.

Because of its association with knowledge and the social positioning as a “righteous institution,” community libraries are perceived as a safe place for women, children and youth. Women have often mentioned how freely they can go to the library. A library card is like a passport for free mobility, giving community members legitimacy in other social interactions as well. The women said “to come to the library I do not need to take the permission of my husband.” Parents find their children safe in a library where they are convinced that their children will learn only good deeds and grow up to be moral citizens.

I grew up with no library in my school or community, so I feel very fortunate to see lives being changed because of libraries, as it keeps me motivated, inspired and satisfied. As one of my colleagues rightly said, libraries of the future should be like liquid which takes shape according to the community, and I feel READ supported community libraries are examples of this.

You have heard many actions that have contributed to sustainability like – sustaining enterprises, need-based services, demand-based approach, and partnerships, etc., but overall “community engagement and ownership” is the key. All of these actions

contributing to sustainability function because of strong “community engagement and ownership.” The READ model has proved that when communities have opportunities to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives, they will support these decisions over the long-term.

We should never underestimate the power of rural communities to change their lives by themselves, our roles should be to facilitate and create the environment. Last but not the least, I would like to let you know the best compliment I heard from communities: “READ just supported us, but we are the leaders, we did it by ourselves.” This strong, commanding voice from the community shows where the success of READ lies and this innermost feeling of communities whom we serve make our initiatives sustainable.

I would like to conclude my lecture with a short clip that we just collected...the story of Kailashi, one of the library users in India!

Thank you.