

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INFORMATION SERVICES: THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT LIBRARY OF BANGLADESH

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INTRODUCTION

Information is the critical missing link between ignorance and enlightenment, between poverty and prosperity, between de-humanized community and empowerment. Information can be transferred into a powerful tool for empowerment of community in Bangladesh where 11.4 million people are living in an area of 147,570 sq. km. Bangladesh is the most densely populated country with low literacy rate, over exploitation of natural resources, frequent disaster, poverty, poor health and social services. The problems are highly pronounced in the rural areas. In one generation or less Bangladesh must win the war on poverty meeting the basic needs of the community people.

Initiatives has already been in process to overcome the situation. Community participation in the process of decision making and implementation is must in the main stream development. Participation of the community is an educational and empowering process in which people could understand their problems and needs and could assure responsibility to plan, manage, control and assess the actions needed for their own development. Information can play a vital role in this regard.

We are now living in an information age. Development of information technology and information societies throughout the world are changing the way of our life. To keep pace with the information age and to face the challenges of the twenty first century community people should be aware of the significance of information as it plays an important role in economic, social, cultural and political development

COMMUNITIES IN RURAL BANGLADESH

Majority of the population(85%) in Bangladesh live in the rural area in abject poverty. They are primarily dependent on agriculture and related jobs. The situation in the rural areas is characterized by lack of ownership of land and other assets by the majority, few income earning opportunities especially in remote areas, the seasonal nature of production and employment etc. It is further marked by inefficient or inadequate governance structures, leaving the majority of the people without access to basic social services. By and large, the poor, disadvantaged by low levels of literacy and lack of power, are left out of decision making processes. The rural areas are also typified by a high degree of fragmentation of markets and personalised, unequal relationships. Inadequate access to financial, political, natural and information resources leaves most of the rural people at the margins of subsistence. 20% of rural people are unaware of government and NGO services. Greater participation of the poor community in planning and decision making and social mobilisation, are therefore desirable objectives of any poverty alleviation strategy as well as for their empowerment.

NGOs AS DEVELOPMENT PARTNER

The Non Governmental Organisations emerge in Bangladesh in early 1970s. The NGO initiatives are complimentary to government efforts. The NGOs are mostly working in rural areas with multifarious programmes for the upliftment and empowerment of the community.

The NGOs are implementing their projects at the grassroots levels. Some of the activities of the NGOs are awareness building, leadership development, skill training, conservation of environment, afforestation, women development, human rights education, health and sanitation, pisciculture, regenerative agriculture, mother and child care, homestead gardening, lobbying on social issues, etc. The variety and depth of the development projects of the NGOs are extensive. Thousands of NGO activists are involved in carrying out such activities in different fields.

In implementing the activities, the development workers need reading materials, specially in their own language, for updating their knowledge, developing skill, analyzing social issues, motivating community people, etc.

GENESIS OF CDL

To meet the demand a group of development activists established Community Development Library-CDL in 1980 to cater to the information needs of the development agencies and social workers. The underlying goal in establishing CDL was to develop an institution which would provide development workers with necessary resource materials and up-to-date information covering development issues.

VISION AND MISSION OF CDL

CDL wants to project itself as a focal point for information and exchange, a centre of last resort in the concerned area, a specialised institution for collection, processing and dissemination of development information at regional, national and local levels.

With the formation of CDL, the first of its kind, a unique opportunity was created to share development visions and experiences at local, regional and global levels. CDL gradually developed itself into a service organization addressing a wide range of development issues through its **Central Library and Documentation Centre** in Dhaka and **27 Rural Information Resource Centres (RIRC)** in the remote areas of Bangladesh, **Research and Publication, Audio-visual Service** and through some other programmes. CDL is linked with academic institutions including universities, development oriented specialised government agencies, professional forums and national and local NGOs for their mutual benefit and exposure.

Socio-economic information on social issues are essential for development planning. CDL is providing information services to NGOs, civil societies and community people working at the grassroots levels. This process is enhancing the participation of rural community in the development process of Bangladesh.

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES OF CDL

The main objective of the organization is to raise the critical consciousness of the society personified in catalysts. Catalysts include, among others, planners, development activists, communication personnel, cultural activists, political activists, human rights activists, environmentalists, gender and development activists, researchers, community leaders and so forth. This means that the target audience of the organization are those persons and organizations who are engaged in various activities intending to change the quality of life of the people, particularly the vulnerable sections, the poor and the women. As a service giving organization, CDL caters to various needs of the community.

CDL feels that a well-planned effort encompassing collection, processing and dissemination of information would help in attaining a required level of awareness in the society and, in turn, would accelerate the process of empowerment of the community.

PROGRAMME FOCUS

A programme package has been evolved in the backdrop of the need of the time. Programmes also evolved in response to the demand of the community. All these programmes are intended to attain the broad objective of empowerment of the community by ensuring their access to information.

Human Rights Education

From its very beginning CDL has rightly sensed the role of information in empowering the community, specially the underprivileged classes through ensuring their legal and human rights. For this, CDL has taken various endeavours through its RIRCs to make rural community aware of their rights and to provide them knowledge of some basic laws so that they can protect themselves against any illegal, unfair and discriminatory social practice. CDL has been playing a pivotal role in community awareness by bringing out a number of posters, monographs, pamphlets and other campaign materials highlighting the major issues of Community Empowerment and Human Rights. Main thrusts of these programmes are :

- To give rural people access to information about civil law.
- To demystify the law through producing resource materials on legal aspects.
- To raise their awareness about their legal rights.
- To empower the community legally and socially.
- To create a platform from where the community can manifest their thoughts and feelings about their rights.

To ensure empowerment of rural community RIRCs are ceaselessly arranging various workshops, video shows, seminars and other programmes on human rights and gender issues to make the viewers understand the necessary perspectives and to act accordingly. Social activists and researchers are getting information support from the newsclippings kept by RIRCs on human rights and other related issues. Campaign materials are being brought out to

assist various advocacy programmes. Close contact has been maintained with other Human Rights organizations to ensure adequate moral and information support.

Poverty Alleviation

The organization believes that poverty is not only lack of resources, but also lack of access to resources. Alleviation of poverty refers not merely to increased income, but to an empowerment process which follows capacity building and institutional development at the grass-roots level. This is, however, a long-term process. Raising of critical consciousness of the poverty-stricken people is a pre-requisite for that.

CDL caters to the need of various organizations working in the field of poverty alleviation. Its documentation programme is largely addressed to this field. Paper clippings are regularly maintained and updated on key poverty issues. CDL has published several reports and books in this sector under its collaboration programme with partner organisations. Besides, CDL has organized many seminars focussing on poverty alleviation and development. It has produced documentary films like "The Silent Disaster" and "Monga" to identify root causes of poverty and marginalization.

Gender

CDL underscores the need for gender balance in the society. The gender strategy is manifested by CDL's past and ongoing activities. In 1983, CDL undertook a case study on *Working Women in Rural Bangladesh*. In 1992, It has brought out two compilations on *Women*, one in Bangla and another one in English. Among other publications include *Demystification of law for Women*, *How Empowerment of Women Succeeds: the path of the non-traditional* and *How to Attain Women's Rights and Power: about unconventional strategies*. Study circles and workshops are regularly organized to raise awareness about gender issues. CDL has a rich collection of videos on gender and development which are used by women resource groups.

Environment

Sustainable development is possible through conservation of bio-diversity and protection from degradation. This is the conceptual framework which guides CDL's policy and practice.

CDL works to raise environmental awareness of the people through print and audio-visual materials. It has the largest collection of environmental video films in the country. It made several films on flood, cyclone and highlighted issues of disaster preparedness, river erosion, coping strategies and sustainable water management. A documentary film entitled the *Beel Dakatiar Brittanto* features the environmental degradation and misery of the people by unplanned structural intervention for so-called water management. CDL also undertakes language versioning of films on environmental issues.

It has published posters as part of its campaign for sustainable environment and has arranged seminar, workshops and projection of environmental film through the RIRC programme. Environmental education has been in CDL programme activities. Public response to CDL's interventions in the field of environmental education is highly inspiring. CDL maintains liaison with the Department of Environment and other environmental organisations.

Health Awareness

One of the main thrusts of CDL is to make the community aware of the adverse effect of unhygienic living. CDL has actively undertaken various programmes and activities to make the community acquainted with different preventive and curative measures. CDL has arranged study circles, video shows and film projections through its RIRCs at different times showing the ways of preventing common health problems and avoiding health nuisances. CDL also collaborates with other agencies to share the news and views on health and related issues. CDL's Audio Visual Library maintains an affluent collection of video documentaries on health related issues and organizes regular screening of health related films and documentaries for the community people.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE IN RURAL BANGLADESH

CDL has been providing information services to the grassroot communities through Rural Information Resource Centres (RIRCs). The RIRCs has library facilities and organize seminars, workshops, study circles, discussion meetings, video shows, sharing experiences to enrich the knowledge on development issues of the community people and NGOs working at the community level. RIRCs also maintaining newscippings on regular basis. The RIRCs has network with local NGOs and community people. In 1997 a total of 2,56,297 people received information service from RIRC and 397 NGOs are involved with RIRC activities. The objectives of RIRC is to create a knowledge base and make access to information on health & sanitation, environment, human rights, gender , poverty alleviation and good governance. Provide facilities for continuing education.

Advisory Committee

Each RIRC has an Advisory Committee. The members are representatives from local government, NGOs, teachers, journalists, local government officials, cultural activists, and from the community. The committee helps to identify resource materials, policy matters, priorities, potential topics, and organizations with whom to be linked. The committee meets monthly and also provides management support on the basis of guidelines to enable community people to be involved in decision-making and programme implementation, and also in directing the centre towards self-reliance.

ACTIVITIES OF RIRC

Resource Centres :

Information services are provided in every centre through the library. The library materials includes books, reports, periodicals, newspapers, magazines, posters, flip charts, bulletins, maps, video films, training materials, annual reports of NGOs, case studies, etc. Before collecting the resource materials needs of the user community are properly assessed. The need of materials are identified through participatory surveys, users workshops, discussion meetings, personal contact, observation, etc. Structured questionnaires are also used for surveying. The subject coverage of books, reports, journals, etc. are on women issues, child issues, agriculture, primary health care, rural development, population, disaster management, education, environment, governance, etc.

Paper Clippings

To equip the community people and the local organisations with latest ideas and experiences paper clippings are made on 25 development issues. The major issues of paper clippings are child issues, environment, rural development, women, land, human rights, health, education, agriculture, etc.

Advocacy through Knowledge Network

CDL has been constantly looking for the effective ways to translate development information and knowledge for the best use of the community specially for the rural communities. Creation of knowledge base, linking global experiences and strengthen the capacity of the civil society in the rural communities the RIRCs regularly organise seminars, workshops, discussion meetings, video shows, book fairs and exhibitions. The programme highlights the priority issues such as human rights, gender, child and child rights, environment, health and sanitation, etc. to raise community awareness. Such seminars/workshops, discussion meetings facilitates exchange of views and ideas among the development workers and the community. It also enhance solidarity among them and help them to get to know each other's experiences, activities, programme areas, beneficiaries, problems, and successes, which in turn helps to minimize duplication.

Publication of a bi-monthly Bulletin

A bi-monthly Bulletin is published based on the rural experience and global development issues. The Bulletin conveys important news like success stories on projects, natural disasters, peoples' initiatives, social movements, modern development trends, etc. RIRCs collect successful case studies on activities of peoples initiatives and the case studies are published in CDL bi-monthly bulletin so that, other can learn from those experiences. The centres also collect information on development issues like gender, environment, education, human rights, land issues, health, sanitation, etc.

Information service through Audio-Visual

Video shows are arranged in each centre. The documentary and feature films on development and social issues are screened. Local NGOs and community people are also allowed to borrow video tapes from CDL centres for training, seminar, workshop and motivational purposes.

Information Board

The RIRCs collects information on local communities and display on boards. Information displayed in the board mainly on number of community organisations and their programme activities, number of educational institutions, hospitals and clinics, area map, land use, crops patterns, communication system, etc

RESULTS

Through the information services of RIRCs development ideas are exchanged and experiences are shared among the community people and development activists working at the grassroots level. The concept of peoples participation, women in development, human rights, environment, health, role of local government, etc. are well conceived by the community people through the information programmes of RIRC. Thus information based community development and civil society movement is getting momentum gradually which ultimately empowering our community people slowly but surely.

INNOVATIONS

CDL has developed a video news service, perhaps the only one in the region. Footage on a host of issues and events are collected and preserved for internal consumption in future or for exchange to other potential users.

CDL provides a marketing outlet for development literature including NGO publications. This, on the one hand, facilitates dissemination of information on NGO activities to a wider audience, as well as brings revenue earning for CDL.

CDL started the provision of In-service Training Programme (Internship) from 1995. The aim and objective of the programme is to create information worker in the field of development. The Post-graduate students of the department of Library and Information Science (LIS), University of Dhaka, are currently undergoing in-service training in CDL after completing their masters' examination. The students are getting hands on training in documentation of development information, computerized information storage and retrieval systems, operation of e-mail, internet etc.

CONSTRAINTS

Working in the field of development information has some in-built constraints. For example, access to basic information is very limited due to weak democratic institutions and culture. This not only hinders free flow of information, but also creates constraints for information workers to work in this field.

CDL is going through a long and arduous process in order to achieve self-reliance. Capital costs for certain programmes like publication and video making are very high. It would be ideal if users pay for the services. But it is not always possible in a socio-economic setting where a large proportion of the users cannot afford to pay to the required extent. It is also not conceivable for CDL to restrict its services for only those who can pay, as it is contrary to the motto of **information for all**. Many books and audio-visual materials are to be imported from outside and involves high cost. It has been endeavored to make some programmes cost-effective by selling certain services

CONCLUSION

Sustainable development hinges upon community's own initiative and wisdom. Efforts from development activists can encourage the community in activating their inner faculties so that they can determine their own destiny and can strengthen their coping capacity to put up with ever changing and challenging situations. This could be enhanced by generating and providing necessary information to the community in a way and medium which is comprehensible to them. Once it is in process, the community itself will be able to voice their own thoughts and feelings which will subsequently facilitate the toilsome task of community empowerment and enlightenment as well. For this, information should be made available at the doorsteps of the community. Development agencies can play a vital role in this respect. The development agencies can facilitate the process of creating an atmosphere where different groups of the community can interact among themselves, can widen their vision, redesign their programmes and actions and thereby integrate themselves in the mainstream development process.

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