NEED OF ASSESSING STRATEGIES FOR RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN INDIA

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"Change means movement, movement means friction, friction means heat, and heat means controversy." Saul Alinsky

INTRODUCTION:

Rural Public Library aims at proving literature, which will increase the value of school education and enable the children who leave school at an early age, to continue their education while earning their living. It provides education for adults, who have lacked it. The Public Library supplies books for the instruction of all those who require technical knowledge relating to industrial and agricultural progress. It exploits the leisure hours of rural folk and cures their ignorance by giving a tonic of a subtle but pleasant mixture of amusement and instruction. The potentiality of well developed Rural Public Library is enormous for the upliftment of the Adivasi Dalit Bahujan poor people. Sir C. V. Raman said, "The library is the most important part of the institution of learning and without it a college or university is just empty shell of buildings". Further, he observed that a good library make them commune with the greatest minds and with the finest souls that the world had produced.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Public Library Movement has maintained the best institutions and incorporated so much of the new as is absolutely necessary. The typical Andhra Pradesh Public Library is not a mere storehouse of books but it is centre for all the healthy activities of village or street including Social, religious, literary and political activities. The concept of modern librarianship in India got a sound footing and obtained professional recognition only after independence. The pioneers in library movement include Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Prof. S. R. Ranganathan and Mr. B. S. Kesavan.

The world libraries, information and knowledge centres have been witnessing sea changes during the 20th century due to emergence of new technologies and other scientific gadgets. The electronic era of the 21st century has brought changes to the public libraries working environment and acquisition of information resources that in turn presupposes the implementation of new strategies, change of structures and devising new acquisition principles.

Knowledge has always been the prime mover for prosperity. A knowledge society is one of the basic foundations for the development of any nation. Knowledge has many forms and it is available at many places. The acquisition of knowledge has therefore been the thrust area throughout the world and sharing the experience of knowledge is a unique culture of our country. In the modern information society libraries have a new role and there are various types of library models.

In the modern information society, where the use of electronic services and Web-based information sources constantly increases, libraries are managed in a more democratic way, have more flexible communication system and work organisation, and their service development is based on the quality and user-orientation of services. To be successful, the libraries should pay more attention to the development trends of information society that would enable to adjust their development strategies to social information needs. For that reason it is important to see library as a part of social model of the society and its role in social development plans and strategies and in legislation. Accurately assessing the situation in small rural public library is important when making decisions allocating public or private resources. There are several tools available for determining and measuring small rural public library needs. Need of assessment can demonstrate and document a known small rural public library need and has the added benefit of involving the public in problem solving and goal setting.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS WHEN PLANNING NEED OF ASSESSMENT:

1. Who is the assessee attempting to inform, influence, or persuade?

2. What purpose are the need assessment intended to accomplish?

3. Whose needs are to be assessed?

4. What questions need to be asked? Do you already know the answers? Can you do anything to change the situation?

5. How will the information be used?

6. What resources are available to do need assessments?

FIVE TECHNIQUES USED IN NEED ASSESSMENT:

1. EXISTING DATA APPROACH:

Already existing statistical data is used to obtain insights about the well-being small rural public library. This approach uses descriptive statistics such as census data, labor surveys, bank deposit data, sales tax reports, police reports and school and hospital information to prepare an assessment report for the small rural public library.

2. ATTITUDE SURVEY APPROACH:

Information is gathered from a representative sample of small rural public library about issues pertaining to their needs. Data is collected by personal interviews, telephone surveys, hand-delivered questionnaires or mail questionnaires. Responses

are generally representative of the whole community.

3.   KEY INFORMANT APPROACH:

The Key Informant Approach identifies small rural public library decision makers who are knowledgeable about the small rural public library and can accurately identify priority needs and concerns. Key informants complete a questionnaire or are interviewed to obtain their impressions of small rural public library needs. The information is then analyzed and reported to the small rural public library.

4.   COMMUNITY FORUM:

A public meeting is held during which time the participants discuss about the needs of small rural public library and its priority needs. All members of the small rural public library are encouraged to express their concerns pertaining to their well-being and perceived needs.

5.   Focus Group Interview:

A group of people selected for their particular skills, experience, views, or position are asked a series of questions about a topic or issue to gather their opinions. Group interaction is used to obtain detailed information about a particular issue.

THE NEED OF ASSESSMENT

As a librarian in a small rural public library, you know about your user's tastes and backgrounds. If you are involved in public library activities and events, you will be familiar with your socio economic conditions of that locality.

A full-scale needs assessment, like the one outlined here, will probably not be necessary. Since this can be both an expensive and time-consuming exercise, you can breathe a sigh of relief. However, you may find it useful to familiarize yourself with the process. Should you feel that there is a need to carry out a needs assessment, this section helps you to decide how best to go about it and what you can expect to gain from doing one. By following the steps outlined here, you can organize and reduce time and costs.

WHAT NEED ARE TOO ASSESSED?

Need assessment determines how well your library is currently meeting the needs of your small rural public library and what other types of resources and services it can provide in the future. Results of a needs assessment study can be used to determine:

à   How extensively the collection is being used and to identify gaps in public libraries;

à   Who uses the public library and ways to reach non-users;

à   How successful public library services are and how they can be improved to reflect the small rural public library needs;

à   Whether the space and physical building are adequate for providing public library services;

à   How the user community is changing (e.g., socio economic status, demographics, etc.);

à   Whether staffing patterns and library hours are adequate.

If your library has never carried out a need assessment (or does so on an infrequent basis), performing one can be a major undertaking. The level and intensity of the exercise depends on particular library and the user community. If the demographics change regularly, you need to assess it more often; a more stable small rural public library may not require frequent assessments.

PERFORMING NEED ASSESSMENT:

Once you decide to undertake a needs assessment study of small rural public library, you must plan your strategy. The four steps to the needs assessment process require that you determine who will conduct the study, what kind of information needs to be collected, how the information will be collected, and how the information will be used.

WHO WILL CONDUCT THE STUDY?

The first step in performing a needs assessment is to decide who will conduct the study. Needs assessment study can be carried out by outside consultants, public library volunteers or public library staff. Your available resources, time frame and comfort level with performing research may influence your decision. There are advantages and disadvantages that must be evaluated and reviewed.

Outside consultants have expertise in how to conduct research studies public libraries utilisation by its user's. They provide objectivity in the needs assessment process by offering an outsider's view. Since consultants are experienced at performing research, this option makes better use of our limited time. The primary disadvantage to using outside consultants is a costly affair and more expensive.

Public Library volunteers from the small rural public library are asset another possibility. Public Library volunteers provide several advantages: they don't cost anything (or very little if you offer them a small stipend for their time) and they save library staff time. One of the disadvantages in using volunteers to help with needs assessments is that they may present a biased interpretation of what the small rural public library needs; thus, it is important to select volunteers who reflect a broad array of the small rural public library. In addition, it may be difficult to find volunteers who are willing to devote their time to this process and who have experience in performing research.

Public Library staff can also perform needs assessments. Public library staff is less expensive than hiring outside consultants. Many public library staff are

inexperienced in research methods and do not have the time to perform needs assessment on top of their regular responsibilities. If the needs assessment becomes an in-house activity, it is important to offer adequate compensation in terms of reducing the staff member's other work responsibilities.

You need to weigh the pros and cons for each method and decide what will be the most effective approach for your library. Often, budget is the major factor restricting the choices. It may be a good idea to use a combination of these methods. For example, you might hire an outside consultant to help you set up the needs assessment study, but then use volunteers to actually implement the study. Dividing the responsibilities in creative ways might help in performing a cost-effective needs assessment.

WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION WILL BE COLLECTED?

The second step in performing a needs assessment is to decide what you hope to learn about your community and what kind of information you plan to collect. For example, do you hope to perform a broad-based study or one that is focused on a particular area? Some of the categories of information you might be interested in collecting include:

Historical Development: To help you understand how the small rural public library became what it is today and to provide insight into the kinds of resources to collect and weed;

Geographical and Transportation Information: To help you understand your small rural public library growth patterns and population distribution;

Political and Legal Factions: To help you decide strategies for small rural public library selection;

Demographic Data (e.g., age characteristics, size, race, and transience of the population): To help you recognize the demographics of your small rural public library and identify population distribution changes;

ECONOMIC DATA: To help you identify your small rural public library economic base;

SOCIAL, CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL AND RECREATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: To help you determine your small rural public library values and social patterns.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE COLLECTED?

Now that you have decided on the types of information you want to collect about your small rural public library you need to determine how to collect that information. You can collect data by interviewing key informants in the small rural public library, holding a small rural public library forum, researching social indicators/ demographic information from public records and reports, and performing field surveys. It is best if you can use more than one of these data collection methods in combination.

However, most libraries don't have the necessary budgetary and staff resources to use more than one method. These data collection methods are discussed further below.

KEY INFORMANTS

Key Informants of the small Rural public Library are people who hold socially responsible positions (such as educators, public officials, clergy and business representatives) or are active in small rural public library events. Key informants, by virtue of their positions in the small rural public library movements have wide contact with people in the community; typically small rural public library members turn to key informants for help in answering their questions. By interviewing key informants, you can get a better understanding of their impressions of the library needs of the small rural public library. However, this method provides subjective data since it is based on opinions that may not reflect the needs of the entire small rural public library.

COMMUNITY FORUM:

Another data collection option is to hold a community forum. A community forum involves holding a group event that may include the entire community. It is a good idea to include as many as possible of the people who use (or potentially could use) your resources to help decide what should be available in your library. Community forums can give visibility to your library and raise its status within the community. However, these forums require lots of planning and publicity. The majority of the attendance will probably be active library users, rather than those who do not use the library frequently or at all. This can make it difficult to determine how to encourage non-library users to use the library, which is one of the reasons you are probably doing the needs assessment in the first place! Another disadvantage of this method is that it tends to provide subjective and impressionistic data for the community's needs.

PUBLIC RECORDS:

A more objective method of data collection is to use public records (such as the national Census) to find out the social indicators or demographics of your community. Using these techniques, research has found several factors (e.g., age, gender, education level, income level, locality, marital status) that tend to contribute to library use (from Evans, 1995):

· Library use decreases with age.

· Women use libraries more than men.

· Library use increases when people have more education, until the post graduate level; library use decreases when people reach the post graduate level.

· Library use is low when people have a low income or a high income.

· The greater the distance people must travel to get to the library, the less they use the library.

· Couples with children use the library more. You can determine these and other traits in your community from public records, which can help you, identify needs for your community and encourage greater participation.

SURVEYS:

Surveys and questionnaires involve asking individuals in the small rural public library area about their library needs. Surveys can be implemented in several ways:

· Mailing questionnaires to randomly selected members of the community (or in small communities, to all households)

· Performing telephone surveys

· Handing out surveys while people are in the library

· Posting questionnaires on your public access computer catalog (if your library has one).

Response rates vary depending on the method used. For example, mailed surveys tend to have the lowest response rates while surveys performed over the telephone tend to have higher participation rates. While mailed surveys are the most expensive option and get low response rates, the mailed survey method requires very little time to implement and is easy to coordinate. It is standard practice to provide confidentiality to your survey participants; reassuring your participants that their survey responses will be kept confidential might help improve your response rates, especially in a small community.

Information gathered from surveys is only as good as the questions that are asked; thus, the phrasing of survey questions is a very important consideration and can have a tremendous impact on the results you get. In addition to the way the question is phrased, survey questions can be formatted in several ways: as open ended questions that require the participant to write in a response, as fixed alternative questions that ask participants to select one of the presented options, or as closed questions that require participants to answer yes or no. Each of these formats has advantages and disadvantages; how you phrase and format these questions must be carefully considered. It is always a good idea to pretest your questions to help identify flaws in the question format. You might also want to solicit help from an experienced survey researcher at this stage, if you are performing the needs assessment yourself.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE USED?

In order to make use of the information you have collected, the results have to be interpreted. To interpret the data, some statistical analyses are often applied to identify what the majority of the community feels are the most important needs. An important feature of the results should be a reflection of whether the current goals of the library are meeting (and will continue to meet) the needs of the community. Is the library collecting for the present needs of the community or for past needs, or is it

acquiring items to satisfy its staff? When the data analysis is complete, it should be possible to produce a rank-ordered list of the most important changes identified by the community; this ranking can be used to set budget priorities. At the end of this process, it is a good idea to share your findings with the community in some way: holding a group meeting, creating displays at the library, or writing articles to appear online or in the local newspapers.

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