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Rural Community Information Services: Guidelines for Researching Need, Setting Up Services and Evaluating Performance

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing awareness of the importance of information services that meet the needs of rural communities in developing countries. This prompted the IFLA Section of Public Libraries to convene a small working group which met at the 1987 IFLA Conference in Brighton. The group recommended that a project should be set up which would promote and assist the development of such community information services. The four stages of the project are:

- A literature review to establish the state of the art and to provide guidelines on the development of rural community information services.
- Research in a small number of locations to establish the nature, scope and extent of the need for community information services.
- Establishment, monitoring and evaluation of a small number of experimental services.
- Dissemination of the results.

This paper summarizes the draft guidelines which were prepared from the literature review. The intention is that they will be tested and refined at the second and third stages of the project. They are intended to assist librarians, community development workers, cultural officers and others who are trying to set up information services in rural areas. The aim of the services is to help people to deal with the problems which they face in the course of their daily lives and to participate in the development of their societies.

The underlying philosophy of these guidelines is that a participatory approach should be taken. That is, the local communities themselves should play an important part in analyzing their own needs, establishing the service and monitoring and evaluating its success. The services which result from these guidelines should be appropriate to local needs and they should form an integral part of the community they serve. To achieve this it is necessary for the services to be developed by people who are:

- Known to the community and considered by that community to be appropriate people for the work.
- Chosen by the community, or who at least work with the acceptance of the community.
- Introduced to the community in ways which satisfy all the traditional and current political protocol requirements.
- Constantly present in the community providing help and attention.

It is important to stress these points. The services we are attempting to develop can only succeed if they grow up as part of the community and if they are owned by the community. This calls for sensitivity, commitment and identification on the part of the workers helping to establish the services. Finally, it is worth making the point that these guidelines concentrate solely on the provision of information. The importance of traditional library services is not denied – it is simply outside the scope of the guidelines.

Analyzing Community Needs

The first stage in the establishment of a rural community information service is a thorough analysis of the needs within the community. There is always a temptation to move quickly to the establishment of an actual service. It is important to resist this. If the service is to be successful, it is necessary to spend a considerable amount of time and effort working with the community to identify what its needs are.

The review of research has indicated that the nature of the information needed in rural areas varies from community to community and that in most cases people meet their information needs by talking to friends, neighbours and relatives. This does not provide sufficient detail to enable the service to be planned and it needs to be supplemented by the collection of detailed local information.

To collect the detailed information it is necessary to build up a picture of:
- The community to be served – the community profile
- The primary information providers in the community – the information providers' profile
- The information needs of people in the community and the extent to which they are being met – the information needs profile.

To collect the information for these profiles it is necessary to undertake some research. As with all the other stages in the development of the information service it is important to involve the community in the design and conduct of the research.

The community profile. The aim of the community profile is to enable the project workers to get to know the community as a whole. The profile should cover the community's socioeconomic and political features, its culture and traditions, its leadership and power structure, its economic potential and how its resources are distributed and the nature of its local institutions and decision-making processes.

To achieve this it helps to divide the task into three parts: 1) a description of the environment; 2) an analysis of the population; and 3) an understanding of how people in the community spend their lives.

To collect information about the environment, or the context within which the community exists, it is worth starting by trying to identify and obtain copies of national or regional plans. Try also to identify national or regional agencies which may collect and store information about the community. Try to identify and obtain relevant reports or surveys. Try also to arrange interviews with planners and administrators. Spend time talking to key people within the community.

All these sources of information will provide a picture of the community and the context within which it exists. They will, however, give an official or formal account of the situation. It is necessary to complement this with a view from the position of someone who is not in authority. To obtain this attend informal meetings in the community; talk to ordinary people at their meeting places, at work and when they are at leisure. Try to see things through their eyes.

The section of the community profile which is concerned with the environment might contain information on the following topics: patterns of settlement and land use; the economics of the community and the nature of employment; transport and communications; utilities and services such as electricity, water and sewerage; facilities such as shopping, health services and leisure facilities, and local government and administration.

The next part of the community profile concerns the population in the community. To obtain this information, start with the most recent census, if one exists. This will provide the basic framework of information. It will be necessary to build on this framework, collecting more detailed information about the community in question. To do this try to identify reports and surveys which contain relevant information. These may have been produced by government departments, non-governmental agencies or community development organizations.

Try to collect information on the following topics: the size of the population; its ethnic composition; levels of education and, particularly, levels of literacy; health; income levels and the distribution of income; housing; employment, and the cultural background of the community.

The information about the community's environment and the analysis of the population will, however, provide only part of the picture. Experience shows that it is vitally important to get to know people in the community – to appreciate not only their physical circumstances and social and political environment, but their beliefs, traditions, values and psychological outlook, their life style and the daily demands on their time and energy. What do they worry about if they cannot sleep at night?

Information of this kind can only be obtained slowly by getting to know the community and the people who live there. It will be necessary to make informal contact, to talk, to observe and above all else, to listen.

Developing a community profile could become a major task on its own, taking years to compile. It is important, therefore, to keep the work in perspective. Be quite clear why you are collecting the information – it is to build up a basic picture of the numbers, lifestyle and needs of the people in the community and it will be used to design and to plan the development of the service. The secondary purpose of the process is every bit as important – it is to begin the process of participation by local people and to see needs through their eyes.

To make the task manageable, keep things simple and collect only the information which is essential. If more detail is needed it can be added later. Too much information will confuse rather than clarify the situation.

The information providers' profile. No information service exists in a vacuum. It is important to have a clear picture of existing information provision before any steps are taken to plan a new service. This should include both the formal channels for information provision and the informal, traditional ways of information exchange.

It is perhaps easiest to start with the formal channels. These could include the information provided by government services, non-governmental organizations, the mass media and traditional sources such as traditional courts or village elders.

Most of these should have been identified through the community profile. Establish contact with each of the information providers and arrange a meeting or an interview to gather information on the following aspects of the service:

- Who provides the money for and manages the service?
- What is its prime objective?
- Is there a permanent office in the community or are visits made by extension workers?
- When is the service available?
- How many staff provide information and what training have they received?
- On which subjects do the staff give information?
- In which formats is the information provided?
- How many people do they provide information with each year?
- Is there a mechanism for feeding information back from local people as well as to them?
- Where do they get their own information from?
- What contact do they have with other information providers?

Interviews with traditional, or informal, information providers should focus on their role in the community, the people to whom they provide information, the subject matter and the format of the information and the method by which it is provided.

The information collected in the interviews and meetings should be supplemented by impressions of the services gained from discussions with individual members of the community.

The information needs profile. It is very difficult to assess people's need for information but an attempt to do so must be made if the community information service is to be relevant. The review of the literature indicates that there are many ways of attempting to assess information needs. It is possible for example, to learn a considerable amount from the community profile and the profile of information providers.

The community profile will indicate areas of social need. Low levels of literacy, for example, suggest that there is a need for information about literacy programmes. Similarly, high levels of infant mortality could suggest that there is a need for information about health, nutrition and sanitation.

The information providers' profile will also indicate different needs for information. In the discussions with information providers a picture should have emerged of the gaps in information provision and of the areas where the information providers themselves feel that they are unable to meet all the needs with which they are faced.

While these two profiles can give much useful information they are unlikely to provide a full enough picture. There is no substitute for a community survey which sets out specifically to identify information needs.

When planning such a survey, it is necessary to be clear about the nature of the information needs which are being surveyed. It is possible to survey information needs in different ways by asking people about different types of information needs:

- *Perceived needs.* It is possible to learn a lot by simply asking people what information needs they think they have. The best way to do this is to allow people to say what they consider to be their main needs and then to prompt them by asking about the information they need in particular subject areas such as health or education.

  The problem with perceived needs is that people are frequently unaware that they need information. This may be because they do not see that information can be used to solve a problem which they face – they may simply not appreciate that there is a solution to the problem.
- *Actual needs.* Another way to explore information needs is to ask people about the information which they have actually needed over the last month or year. Here it is worth noting that for many people "information" is a rather vague concept and it is often more helpful to ask them whether they need to find an answer to a question, solve a problem or to make a difficult decision.

  It is important to use a timescale which is relevant to the experience of the people being surveyed. One month is quite a short time, and might exclude many information needs. Equally a year may be a long time for some people unless the timescale can be related to something like a harvest or a wet season.
- *Hypothetical needs.* Here information needs are explored by asking people what they would do if they needed information about a particular problem or situation. This may give a good picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing information services.

  The problem with asking about hypothetical information needs is that it is necessary to select problems and situations with which people can identify. Even then, many people find it difficult to respond to a hypothetical situation.
- *Existing information services.* Much can be learned about information needs by asking people about the use they make of the existing information services and about their views of the services.
- *Preferred ways of meeting needs.* Finally it is possible to ask people how they would most like to satisfy a perceived or an actual need. This approach has the advantage that the responses are not restricted to the services which are already provided. The limitation is that people often find it difficult to think of or to describe services which are outside their experience.

  The main benefit of this approach is that it is the one which is most likely to identify ways of building upon existing informal methods of acquiring and exchanging information.

It is important to stress that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it would be sensible to use more than one in any survey to get the fullest possible picture.

There are three main research methods which can be used for a survey of community information needs: 1) self-completed questionnaires; 2) interviews; and 3) group discussions. Before deciding upon which method to use, it is worth beginning with some informal discussions in the community to ensure that the survey approach adopted is best suited to the community.

These discussions should be held with each of the main groups in the community, taking care not to exclude anyone. Discussions should be held with women as well as with men, with members of all ethnic and caste groups, with farmers as well as commercial and industrial workers.

Having introduced the idea of a survey in this way and having gained the acceptance of the community, it is possible to begin the design of the survey. The first question to answer is which of the three research methods is to be used.

Self-completed Questionnaires

These surveys are very common in developed countries, but they are likely to be of limited value in most rural communities in developing countries unless levels of literacy are very high.

If questionnaires of this kind are used they should be short and designed so that they are very easy to complete. Careful thought should be given to the sequence of questions and to the ways in which they are linked together. Ideally respondents should be required to answer each question in turn.

The questions themselves should be kept as simple as possible and should use words and language with which the people will be familiar. Questions should be of the closed type – that is, the respondent should be able to answer by choosing between a limited number of alternatives. Open questions, where the respondent is asked to write in an answer, are less likely to obtain a response and are much more difficult to analyze.

The success of the questionnaire will improve if it is carefully designed. It should look attractive and should encourage the respondent to spend the time necessary to complete it.

Self-completed questionnaires are administered in four stages. Having designed the questionnaire it is always worth pre-testing it with a small number of people who can suggest ways in which it can be improved. It is also worth pilot testing the revised version of the questionnaire. In a pilot test the questionnaire is sent to a small sample of respondents to check that it can be completed without difficulty and that it produces the information required.

Having pre- and pilot-tested the questionnaire the amended version can be administered. This is usually done by post with a personal covering letter which explains the purpose of the study, who is carrying it out, what the results will be used for and stressing that the information supplied will remain confidential. The questionnaire should give a date and an address for the return of the form and a stamped addressed envelope should be enclosed.

Once the return date is passed it is usual to send reminder letters to those who have not returned the form.

The other major point to consider is sampling. If statistically reliable and generalizable data is required, then a random or probability sample will be needed. In such a sample everyone in the community has an equal chance of being included and, if the sample is sufficiently large, the replies should provide a true representation of the views of the community as a whole. Where such precision is not required a purposeful or opportunity sample can be used. In these samples people are selected from different groups in the community in order to cover a range of community needs.

The whole question of sampling is a complex one and there is insufficient space to deal with it satisfactorily here. It is strongly recommended that an experienced research worker or statistician is consulted about this aspect of the survey.

The main advantages of self-completed questionnaires are that they are cheap, they can be used to survey a large number of people and, if the questions are designed carefully, there should be little scope for bias. Against this, they are alien to many cultures, they rely on high levels of literacy and the response rate is likely to be low.

Interview Surveys

Interview surveys overcome many of the problems associated with questionnaires. In their most structured form, the interviewer simply reads out questions from a schedule which looks very much like a self-completed questionnaire and records the replies by ticking the appropriate responses. Other interview surveys are much less structured and the interviewer will simply have a list of topics to be covered. These are much more difficult to conduct as the interviewer must encourage and control the flow of information, yet do so without introducing any bias into the interview. They also have to record the responses as they go along.

In many rural communities firmly structured interviews are neither appropriate nor possible. In such cases it is necessary to use an unstructured approach and to avoid bias by attempting to retain a neutral stance. The skill lies in being able to show interest in what is being said without becoming personally involved.

A problem arises with recording the results of interview surveys. The interviewer can only write down a small proportion of what is said in the interview and in selecting and summarizing the information recorded it is likely that some bias will be introduced. To overcome this many people use tape recorders. These have their own disadvantages. First, the equipment can, and does, break down. Secondly, tape recorders are not necessarily familiar to the people being interviewed and they may feel uncomfortable knowing that everything they say is being recorded.

Analyzing unstructured interviews can be very difficult. It is seldom possible, or desirable, to have the complete tape recording transcribed. Instead it is necessary to listen to the tapes and to make notes which can then be analyzed.

The main advantages of interview surveys are that they can provide a detailed understanding of needs and they will give a much higher response rate than self-completed questionnaires. They have clear advantages in communities where levels of literacy are low. The main disadvantage is cost. Interview surveys need a lot of time on the part of the researchers and this is always expensive.

Group Discussions

Group discussions are another way of gathering the same type of information as the unstructured interview. With this technique, a small group of people – usually between six and eight – meet to discuss specific topics in a relatively structured way. The role of the researcher is to introduce each new topic in turn and to ensure that everyone contributes to the discussion. It is also necessary to control and to stimulate the flow of the discussion.

Group discussions are good for getting a detailed understanding of a small number of issues. Each discussion should last less than an hour and it is seldom possible to cover more than three or four topics. The discussions should be recorded and analyzed in the same way as unstructured interviews.

Each of the research approaches has its strengths and weaknesses and it is often worth using more than one. Interviews, for example, could identify a number of key issues which could be explored in greater detail in group discussions. When designing the survey it is worth following these general guidelines:

- Involve local people from all groups in the community at all stages.
- Borrow techniques from other research studies and learn from their mistakes.
- Keep things simple and straightforward. Use techniques which themselves are uncomplicated and which are within the competence of the people undertaking the research.
- Do not collect too much information; restrict it to what is really needed. A simple study fully analyzed and interpreted is worth far more than one which collects complex data that cannot be analyzed.
- Bring in research experts where necessary to give advice on the design of the study, to provide training, to help with the survey itself or to assist with the analysis of the results.
- Be aware of the distortion which the research itself can create. This is particularly important in communities where research itself is an alien concept.

Having conducted the community information survey a picture should have emerged which shows:

- The range of information needed by different groups in the community and the priorities which should be assigned to those needs.
- The existing formal providers of information and the extent to which they meet the identified needs.
- The main informal methods by which information is obtained and exchanged within the community.
- The different factors which will determine the design of the information service, such as the educational and literacy levels; the languages spoken; the periods in the day when people will be free to use the service; the most appropriate location for the service; the availability of transport and communications, and so on.

These results should be discussed with individuals and groups in the community. Not only does this provide an opportunity to check that the results and the interpretation placed upon them are valid, it also provides another opportunity to involve the community in the project and to reinforce its commitment to the eventual information service.

It should be possible at the end of this process to have a clear idea of the main groups in the community who have needs for information and the subjects and the nature of those needs. It should also be clear how the proposed information service will need to work alongside and build upon the work of existing information providers. Indeed one possible conclusion is that existing information providers already have adequate means of disseminating information to the local people and what is needed is a resource centre to supply them with appropriate information resources for their work.

Establishing Appropriate Services

It is impossible to say in advance what the most appropriate service will be for any community. Each service should be designed to meet the particular needs of the community and to fit in with the existing pattern of information provision. It is for this reason that so much emphasis has been given in these guidelines to the assessment of community needs.

Once those needs have been assessed, however, it is possible to begin to design and to plan the development of the community information service. A number of basic principles should be followed during this design and planning process.

- *Use a community development approach.* It is crucial to accept that effective services cannot be imposed on communities, but must be set up from within the community itself. Further, the service should be designed so that it is managed and controlled by the community.
- *Build on existing services.* The existing information providers should be involved in the design of the new service and an attempt should be made to coordinate developments. In some cases the most appropriate information service might be one which meets the needs of other information providers, leaving them to provide the service direct to people in the community.
- *Use a range of information formats.* An information service intended for direct use by rural people cannot be based on printed materials alone. It should build on traditional patterns of information seeking, and this will mean using oral communications reinforced by poster, charts, photographs, slides, films, audio tapes and realia.
- *Use active information workers.* The workers must understand the information that they are handling and they must be able to interpret and apply that information to the particular needs of the user. They should be able to repackage information from government and other organizations into formats that are more appropriate to the villagers' needs. They should also record traditional knowledge.
- *The information service should be two-way.* The service should act as a communication channel from, as well as to, the local community. The service should enable the local community to feed back to government and others information on the impact of their policies and on areas of need not being met by policies or programmes.
- *Learn from others.* Build on the experience of others who have established rural community information services.

With these principles in mind, it is possible to begin the actual planning and design. Again it is worth emphasizing that members of the community should be involved in the process. This involvement might be achieved through informal discussion groups or it might be more appropriate to establish a formal management group or committee.

The first task should be to specify the objectives of the service. These objectives should cover: the groups in the community that will be served by the information service; the subject areas on which information will be provided; the relationship with other information providers; the style of work of the service, and the extent to which the service will do more than simply provide information.

It will be necessary to decide on a management structure for the service, to locate suitable premises and to decide on the opening hours. The planning will also have to include a consideration of the number and type of staff that will be required and whether they will need training.

At this early stage it is also worth thinking about the information materials and equipment which the staff will need.

Finally, careful thought needs to be given to the financial element of the service. How much money will be needed and where will it come from?

Monitoring and Evaluating Performance

To ensure that an information service remains effective and that it responds to the needs of the community which it serves, it is necessary to monitor and to evaluate its performance.

The monitoring and performance system should be designed in accordance with eight basic principles. These are:

- Performance monitoring and evaluation should be an integral part of the management process.
- The measures used should relate performance to the needs of the community.
- The measures should assess performance within the limits set by the levels of resources available.
- Performance should be monitored in the context of the objectives of the service.
- Community information services should provide an amalgamation of different services.
- The level of monitoring should be determined by the amount of detail required.
- Comparison is an essential aspect of performance monitoring and evaluation.
- Basic measures should be adapted to suit local circumstances.

The starting point should be the measurement of the resources used by the information service. The resources should be related to the size of the community served and figures should be expressed "per thousand population".

Information should be collected on the number of staff, their training and experience and their language skills. The monitoring process should also assess the extent to which the staff reflect the composition of the community.

The information resources should also be measured, both in terms of the resources available to the service and the capacity of the service to produce resources to meet the needs of the community.

Finally the premises and equipment available for the service should be monitored.

Having measured the resources used by the service, attention now focuses on the performance or output of the service. Here a range of different aspects of the service can be measured. The particular combination of measurements must be determined by the objectives of the service. The following range of possibilities should be considered:

- *The range of enquiries*. This will give a good indication of what the people in the community feel the service is good at doing.
- *The number of enquiries*.
- *The number of people returning with a second enquiry*. This is a good indicator of the extent to which the service is satisfying needs.

- *The type of user*. This shows whether the service is meeting the needs of all groups in the community.
- *Detailed help and assistance*. It may be worth recording separately enquiries which required detailed help.
- *Information feedback*. The volume of this work should be recorded.
- *Resource centre work*. Where the service aims to provide support to other information providers the extent of this work should be measured.
- *Information work with groups*. This is a significant element in the work of some centres and should be monitored.
- *Repackaged information*. The amount of work involved with producing new materials should be measured.

Measurement of resources and an appropriate range of outputs will provide a basis for the regular monitoring and evaluation of the service. This should be supplemented by occasional surveys to assess the attitudes and perceptions of people generally in the community, the users of the service and the providers of other services. Self-completion questionnaires, interviews and group discussions are the techniques which can be used to collect this information.

Evaluation can be a challenging and threatening experience for people working in a service and it is therefore important to involve them in the design of the monitoring and evaluation processes. They should be encouraged to provide a continuous flow of information about the efficiency and the effectiveness of the service.

The local community should also be involved in the evaluation. The final responsibility, however, must rest with the management group or committee.

Planning a community information service should be seen as a cyclical process which involves assessing the needs of a community; establishing objectives in the light of those needs; developing services which will enable the objectives to be achieved; providing services; monitoring and evaluating their performance; revising objectives in the light of performance and changed needs, and so on. Involving staff, management and the local community in this whole process will help to ensure that the community information service is appropriate to the needs of the community it serves.

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