

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)

Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

February 2010

Community Information Services Through Public Libraries in Bangladesh: Problems and Proposals

Md. Anwarul Islam

University of Dhaka, anwar_81du@yahoo.com.au

Muhammad Mezbah-ul-Islam

mezbah2000@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Islam, Md. Anwarul and Mezbah-ul-Islam, Muhammad, "Community Information Services Through Public Libraries in Bangladesh: Problems and Proposals" (2010). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 320.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/320>

Community Information Services Through Public Libraries in Bangladesh: Problems and Proposals

Md. Anwarul Islam

Lecturer

Dr. Muhammad Mezbah-ul-Islam

Associate Professor

Department of Information Science & Library Management

Faculty of Arts

University of Dhaka

Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh

Introduction

In the present information age, information is considered to be a resource, a product, and thereby a need. Therefore, the problem of developing countries of the world is not merely economic poverty; it is also information poverty, which must be a great concern to human beings. Information is a basic need, and must be a priority. This kind of productive survival information is called Community Information (CI), which is crucial for socio-economic development in developing countries. Community Information Services (CIS) are concerned with the provision of problem-solving information. Public libraries are important institutions in the information society. In Bangladesh, these libraries have served society in various forms for development where there is a crucial shortage of educated and skilled manpower, logistical support, and infrastructure. Bangladesh needs to emphasize community information services development in their development plan, because it still faces poverty, health, and literacy problems. A majority of its population, more than 80 percent, lives in rural areas where the average information access is still very low. Illiteracy and lack of information service facilities have been pinpointed as primary causes of these problems, especially in rural communities. To improve the living standards of the rural people, the government of Bangladesh has as its goals to increase information service facilities and the eradication of illiteracy. Public library based community services are a means to solve these problems.

Community Information Services

CI is a combination of two terms, i.e., Community and Information. The term "Information" is used to identify many concepts; hence, it is extremely difficult to define it precisely. Normally, information is a message, communicated by a communicator to a receiver. Giggey (1988) defines community as "a group of people who have something common. This can be their age, education, religion, interest, political affiliation, activities, work, possession or a combination of two or more of these". CI is information for the survival and growth of the community, or information required by members of the community to make effective use of the available resources around them. The information service through which CI is provided to communities is called Community Information Service (CIS).

It may be worthwhile to look at two definitions of this concept in order to understand the focus and scope of CIS. Joseph (1993) described CIS in 1976 as offering:

- Survival information, such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, and political rights.
- Citizen action information, needed for effective participation as individuals or as members of a group in the social, political, legal, economic process.

CIS was defined in 1980 by a group appointed by the British Library Association as:

Services which assist individuals and groups with daily problem-solving and with participation in the democratic process. The services concentrate on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs, and their rights. (BLA 1980)

The generally accepted definition today is services offered by all types of libraries and other organizations to provide people with information relevant to their everyday life, particularly those in the lower-economic and disadvantaged groups who need to learn how to obtain, understand, and use information. It was originally intended to help eradicate deprivation and illiteracy in the rural areas. CIS activities include health, education, employment, agriculture, village industries, daily necessities, consumer services, and so on.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this study are:

- To be familiar with the concept of Community Information Service (CIS) and its effectiveness through public libraries
- To discuss present CIS activities and propose a plan for introducing public library based CIS in Bangladesh.
- To suggest that public library based CIS will be an innovative way to help people in communities, and provide recommendations for overcoming the limitations.

Methodology

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches along with review of related literature. The conceptual and textual information related to the present study were collected from primary and secondary sources of information such as books, journals, magazines, newspapers, conference proceedings, official documents, and unpublished sources. Websites were also used for collecting information.

CIS and Public Libraries Worldwide

CIS is concerned with the provision of problem-oriented information. UNESCO (1972) states that the “public library must offer to adults and children the opportunity to keep in touch with their times, to educate themselves continuously and to keep abreast of progress in sciences and arts. Its contents should be a living demonstration of the evaluation of knowledge and culture, constantly reviewed, kept up-to-date and attractively presented. In this way it will help people from their own opinions, and develop their creative and critical capacities and powers of appreciation. The public is concerned with the communication of information and ideas, whatever the form in which these may be expressed.” The public library is rightly designated as an agency for the promotion of universal education. Its task is to disseminate information and enrich personal and social life. The idea of public libraries offering

information on everyday societal problems is not new. However, public library involvement in this area in the UK and USA increased after World War II, with active cooperation among governmental and social agencies to help disadvantaged segments of the community.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a shift took place and libraries started offering CIS directly. CIS was introduced by public libraries in the Western countries in response to an expressed need at a time when general library service was more or less universally available. The New York Public Library is one of the most active in offering CIS. Each branch has current information on local community and city-wide services. People can find information about community groups, consumer and educational organizations, health and social service agencies and religious, recreational and cultural institutions. The New South Wales public library in Australia develops guidelines for public library participation in CIS on the basis of reports from Australia's Community Information Sharing Service (CISS). In Thailand (Kulthorn, 1999), the Department of Non-Formal Education has a policy for all types of public libraries to provide and promote community activities.

The shift to CIS in libraries took place at about the time when the profession began defining specific services for specific communities. Public library service in developing countries is still very limited. It generally serves small segments of the urban population and is minimal. Service is still traditional, and the library profession has so far not engaged in the CIS activities. One can safely speculate that interest in CIS in developing countries will also be minimal. Community services could be taken as extension services by libraries. The Bangladeshi population still needs awareness about public sanitation, family planning, socio-economic reforms, education, and so on. CIS can be built over the existing public library system for free and impartial use of information.

Present Community Information Activities in Bangladesh

CIS activities in Bangladeshi libraries are minimal. Personal observation in several libraries confirmed that no organized CIS activity was being undertaken by these libraries. A few libraries offer bits and pieces of CIS, e.g., information and reference services that could form the basis for future planning. CIS in Bangladesh has not come under close scrutiny. Eighty percent of people live in villages at the present time in Bangladesh. Accelerated growth of the population has created a variety of problems, especially for the poorer and less-educated. CIS is no longer a luxury for many remote villages in Bangladesh, however, thanks to a handful of initiatives following different Rural Information Centers (RIC) models. Though these organizations do not completely guarantee the presence of all standard CIS activities, these centers are a ray of hope for people in the community (Islam & Mezbah-ul-Islam, 2008). These include:

1. The Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM):

Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) launched the first community-learning center, locally known as Gonokendra, in 1987. Now there are more than 100 Gonokendras across the country. Some of the centers are providing ICT facilities and a few centers started using computers for interactive information communication. (<http://www.ahsaniamission.org>)

2. Development Research Network (D.Net):

D.Net is a premier research organization in Bangladesh. Established in 2001, it established four Pallitathya Kendra (Rural Information Centers) as pilot projects in 2005 in remote villages of Bangladesh: Nilphamri, Netrokona, Noakhali, and Bagerhat. (<http://www.dnet.org.bd>)

3. Relief International: Relief International Schools Online division initiated the ILC (Internet Learning Centers) programme in 2003. The programme was launched in 2005 and currently 27 ILCs are in operation across Bangladesh with the majority (16) located in Chittagang. (<http://www.ri.org>)

4. Katalyst:

Katalyst promotes rural ICT initiatives in Bangladesh, and piloted an entrepreneurial model in partnership with two private sector companies to establish Rural ICT Centers (RIC) branded as AlokitoGram and GHAT. (<http://www.katalystbd.com>)

5. Practical Action Bangladesh:

Practical Action was founded in 1966 with commitment to poverty reduction. It established two Rural Technology Centers (RTC) in 2006. These centers provide information services for community people.

6. Community Development Library (CDL):

CDL was established to meet the information needs of the development agencies and people in rural areas. It is a focal point for information exchange, a center of last resort, a specialized institution for processing development information. In order to meet the information needs of rural people, CDL has established 26 RIRC (Rural Information Resource Centers) across the country, whose community services include forums for women and youth, children's corner, awareness-building, knowledge and information sharing, and library facilities.

7. Grameen Phone Community Information Center:

Grameen Phone (GP), Bangladesh launched a pilot project in 2006 called "Community Information Center" through its nationwide EDGE (Enhanced Data Rates for Global Evolution) to provide Internet access and the other services to rural people. CIC provides Bangladeshi citizens greater access to news and information on a range of topics relevant to their daily lives and developments. (<http://www.gpcic.org>).

8. Community Information Services offered by other Organizations:

The three main ministries of Bangladesh—the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, also provide information concerning the work of their organizations through ministry personnel, handouts, radio programs, television programs, and others tools.

Besides these, several attempts have been made to spread information service facilities to rural people, including Bangladesh Telecentre Network (BTN), Amader Gram Learning Center (AGLC), Youth Community Multimedia Center (YCMC), Rural Information Resource Center (RIRC), Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC), BRAC Bdmall Network Ltd (brac Net), Digital Equality Network (DEN), Digital Knowledge Foundation (DKF) and so on.

Public Libraries in Bangladesh

Central Public Library of Bangladesh is the largest public library in Bangladesh. It also houses the Public Library Department, which is managed by the Directorate of Public Libraries under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. The Library has total collections of 14,43,485, shown in the table below.

Central Public Library collections

Name	English	Bengali	Others	Total	Newspapers and periodicals
CPL	81350	86,952	5076	173378	56 (Both Bengali and English)
OPL(67)	189603	1071117	10357	1270107	1537

(Source: Directorate of Public Library in Bangladesh, Dhaka-2008)

Books in the collection are mostly in Bengali and English, along with Urdu, Hindi, Arabic and Persian. As a depository library, it deposits all Bangladeshi publications under copyright. The Library receives most Bangladeshi daily newspapers and periodicals. It has a collection of juvenile material and provides separate reading facilities for children. The average number of readers is about 3,500 a day (Wikipedia, 2008).

In Bangladesh, there are two broad categories of public libraries: Non-government public libraries and Government public libraries. Government public libraries are operated by public funds raised through regular budget appropriation of the government. These libraries are monitored by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. The newly organized Department of the Public Library has 68 libraries under administrative control (Sarker, 2006). The table describes them further.

Government public libraries

Name	Number
Central Public Library	01 (Dhaka)
Divisional Public Library	05 (Chittagang, Rajshahi, Khulna,Sylhet,Barishal)
District Public Library	58
Branch Public Library	4 (Dhaka 2, Rajshahi 1, Mymensingh 1).

The aided non-government public libraries were the forerunner of public library service in this country. In 2003, a survey was conducted by National Book Center and it shows that there are about 1,600 private public libraries in Bangladesh, which are independently managed. Besides these, Islamic Foundation Library, Shisu (Child) Academy, Community Development Library, and some NGO libraries provide library services for the public (Majed, 2005). In Bangladesh, there are 482 Upazilas (sub-districts), and government public libraries are not operating in all of them. Through the UNESCO manifesto in 2001 and National Book Policy, 1994, Bangladesh is trying to spread public library service at the village level, but it has not been implemented. Bangladesh is a developing country where resources are limited. It has numerous socio-economic problems. Bangladesh needs an immediate programme of action for improving this situation.

The Problems of Providing CIS through Public Libraries in Bangladesh

As communities change, so do the information needs of the people. A resource center cannot continue to attract users without tailoring information and resources to meet the needs of the community. One of the most difficult but necessary activities in the provision of community information is the assessment of information needs. This must be done regularly, for libraries and information centers to remain relevant (Kaniki, 1994). There are a number of reasons why information needs assessments are not conducted. These include the indifference of library personnel, genuine lack of staff and financial resources, and staff reluctance to conduct such assessments. Related and perhaps more critical is lack of knowledge of assessment techniques and the difficulty of developing simple but reliable methodologies.

The problems of providing CIS through public libraries are summarized below:

Gap between services and real information need:

It has been pointed out that, "one of the best known (reasons) is the discrepancy between the services provided and the real needs of the users. In the developing countries this arises because the introduction of modern information services has tended to be based on, or derived from, traditional library services with no account being taken of the needs of the many and varied users, who are very seldom associated with the planning and operation of the services" (Salman, 1981). In Bangladesh, there is a great gap between service provided and information requirements.

Content of library services:

There is a gap between content of library services and the needs of clientele. Public libraries provide conventional library services such as reference, lending, photocopying, open-shelf reading room facilities, and so on. They are not providing CIS in any real sense.

Lack of understanding:

Many public librarians in rural areas do not know what community people needs are. Their understanding is related to funding or better management skills and frustration over the publics' non-use of library materials and services. As long as librarians remain book oriented, instead of information- and people-oriented, people will continue to ignore the library. Citizens may see the book as neither crucial to their survival needs nor important to their entertainment needs.

Information may not reach people:

The information may not reach the people who need it most. It has been argued that, "there may be something wrong with the delivery system; that is the right information may be available but it is not getting channeled to the people who need it (Stevenson, 1978).

Absence of community information literacy:

Community people are not aware of CIS. The users of public libraries are not as familiar with the concept, as library personnel. The fault may be with the individual. The lack of motivation on the part of individuals to use information is a complex issue. CIS literacy remains low among people in the community and library personnel.

Insufficient library education and in-service training:

In Bangladesh, the number of professionally qualified librarians in public libraries is low compared to developed countries. CIS is not taught in library science courses and this leads to a lack of proper planning to introduce community information system through public libraries.

Poor organizational structure:

It is not possible to promote the development of CIS through public libraries in Bangladesh without first establishing an organizational structure for libraries that includes it.

Lack of reading culture:

The statistics related to the low production of printed material may affect all kinds of library development. There remains a lack of motivation to search for information. People in developing countries, especially in rural areas, still do not have a good quality of life, and are still struggling for economic survival.

The problems are facing public libraries in Bangladesh regarding CIS are centered on the following areas:

- lack of proper training facilities and trained personnel;
- lack of library legislation;
- poor public relations by libraries

Another problem is matching library services and community information needs. Obstacles such as inadequate road and transport systems, cultural and linguistic diversity, and unequal social and educational levels, make the establishment of a nationwide library service and the spread of relevant information an enormous task. To speak of extending services where almost none exist is to ignore the realities.

Providing CIS through Public Libraries in Bangladesh

A public library is the people's university and an asset to a democratic country. Rural libraries are a basic part of this. Rural libraries bring communities forward with information that is useful to daily life. The benefits of CIS can be achieved through developing a rural library system, developing village community libraries and information centers. To improve the lives of rural people in Bangladesh there is a need for careful coordination of public libraries with improved capabilities. The following programme of action is the prerequisite for CIS.

Comprehensive plan

A comprehensive plan for development of the public library system in Bangladesh is needed. A bottom-up approach may be adopted, giving first priority to rural public, private, and other libraries. The government may take the lead role in close consultation with library associations and the universities having LIS schools.

Directory of Community Services

The Central Public Library should make a Directory of Community Services (DCS), in English and Bengali, of the non-profit organizations and groups offering programmes and services to the general public. All government and private public libraries should contain these directories. Library staff would help community people with the directory and other community information materials. They can also prepare a telephone directory of relevant officers or resource persons of different government and non-government departments so that rural people can communicate their needs to those officers. Agriculture, health, fire service, and other service-based organization may be of particular importance.

Creation of CIS Working Group

The Library Association of Bangladesh and Ministry of Cultural affairs can make and declare a strong commitment to CIS, and proclaim its development as a primary goal. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs should create a permanent CIS Working Group. This group should be assigned to work on the following programme:

- Conduct a comprehensive study of the information needs of society in the area of CIS. Different CIS models can be used to develop the framework for such an undertaking.
- Study the professional literature carefully and develop a prototype CIS model to suit local needs and conditions.

Develop Guidelines for Setting up CIS

Once the Working Group has done its work, public libraries should develop guidelines for setting up and providing CIS. Guidelines developed by the American and British library associations can be used as models.

Content Preparation

Information centers, public libraries, and other rural libraries should take initiative to create a unique content preparation programme. Initially, these organizations concentrate on specific areas of information in their content preparation programme.

Distribution of Government Information

To create awareness about policies and programmes, audiovisual programmes are being produced by different government departments. These CD/DVD programmes should be distributed to rural libraries, so that people can easily obtain them.

Mobile Library Services

Mobile library services should be introduced for rural areas or Upazila level public libraries. Public libraries can take an example from Bishwa Shahitya Kendra (World Literature Center), where books are now being distributed through mobile libraries, to spread knowledge among the millions who are scattered across villages.

ICT Awareness

Extensive ICT awareness programmes must be extended at the village level through public and other libraries. If basic ICT awareness develops, it will become convenient for community people to find information at the nearest library other information center.

Trainer in Community Empowerment

In order to maintain community enthusiasm, interest and involvement in library projects, rural librarians need to use strategies like leadership training on topics such as participate planning and decision making (Cheunwattana, 1999).

Staff Development

Public library staff development is a crucial element for the success of a CIS programme. Continuing professional development programmes should be designed for those who are interested in working in this area. The present curriculum of library and information science programmes should be reviewed to accommodate a CIS component. Staff development should also include information on how to work with other professionals, e.g., social workers, who are involved in community development activities.

Interdependence

Interdependence of education and training among the members of the rural and urban communities as well as identification of their own needs and priorities can reduce the gap between these two segments of the society. Public library can play a vital role in this respect (Kamila & Biswas, 2000).

Evaluation Mechanism

Public library management should design a continuous evaluation mechanism to review the progress of the CIS programme and take corrective measures when necessary. What has been proposed above is a very tall order, but a beginning must be made. If professional concern and commitment are there, other elements will follow.

CIS: A Road Map

The Central Public Library of Bangladesh will act as coordinating agency to initiate CIS through public libraries in Bangladesh. The Directorate of public libraries will authorize all public libraries to prepare a work plan for implementation of CIS. Initially, a three- phased implementation plan may be made.

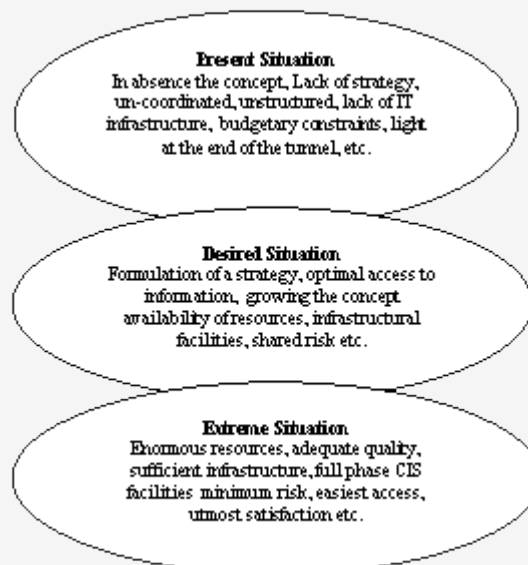
Phase I. CIS may be launched immediately by the ten most-advanced public libraries, which have partial CIS facilities and basic IT facilities.

Phase II. Participants in Phase I may share experiences. Those experiences will guide the less-advanced public libraries who will be included in phase II.

Phase III. The Phase I and II plan will advance to Phase III, with all CIS components to achieve dissemination of community information. An evaluation cycle will allow libraries to make improvements.

The evolution of CIS is shown below.

Figure 1: Evolution of CIS in Bangladesh



The figure shows how a CIS-based public library system will make the present position more convenient, user-friendly, and fruitful for the people of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

CIS is an important issue, and it has been theoretically accepted that a public library system can play a major role in it. Public libraries contribute immensely to the educational attainment of rural people. It has always been the door to learning for a great majority of the populations that they serve. In rural communities in Bangladesh, where people still face many social and economic problems, library services are not so important as public health or public utilities. A CIS-based public library system is a new idea in rural communities and a challenge for public librarians to work in such a context. Public librarians must have an active role in providing appropriate library services to communities. They must build more cooperation with communities to find their real needs. The government programmes that provide education, combat illiteracy, increase social awareness, etc., may not bring a desired result until they are assisted by community people. A massive investment in public libraries of Bangladesh is needed to make them true CIS centers for community people.

References

Cheunwattana, A. (1999). Delivering and promoting library services in Rural Thailand, *65th IFLA Council and General Conference, Bangkok, Thailand, August 20-28*.

Giggey, S. (1988). *Rural community resources: A guide for developing countries*. MacMillan: London, 11-12.

Islam, M. A., & Mezbah-ul-Islam, M. (2008). Community Information Centers: A step to bringing connectivity of the rural communities in Bangladesh. *Planner-2008*, Nagaland University, India: 55-70.

Joseph, C. D. (1993). Community Information Services: A proposed definition. In *Information Politics: Proceedings of the 39th ASIS Annual Meeting* (13:2, Fiche 9), as quoted in Bunch, A. (1993). *The basics of community information work*. 2 nd ed. (London: Library Association)

Kamila, K., & Biswas, S.C. (2000). Public libraries as community information centers. *Librarian* (7): 3-10.

Kaniki, A.M. (1994). Community resource centers and resource center forums in the transformation and post-transformation era in South Africa. *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science* 4 (1): 47-51.

Kulthorn, L. (1999). Public library in Thailand. *65th IFLA Council and General Conference*. Bangkok, Thailand August 20-August 28.

Majed, K.A. (2005). Development of public libraries in Bangladesh. *Souvenir*, Public Library Directorate, Dhaka, 36-38. [Bengali]

Parker, J.S. (1979). *Bangladesh public library survey: final report in three volumes*. London: Library Development Consultants.

Salman, L. (1981). The information needs of developing countries: Analytical case studies. *Unesco Journal of Information Science, Librarianship and Archive Administration*, 3(4): 223-227.

Sarker, N.C. (2006). *Public library in the development of socio-economic situation and education*. Dhaka: Notundhara, 87-88

Stevenson, G. (1978). The public library in a communications setting. *Library Quarterly* 48 (4): 393-415.

The Library Association. Working Party on Community Information, Community Information (1980). *What libraries can do: A consultation document*.

UNESCO (1972). UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. *UNESCO Bulletin for Libraries* 26 (3): 129-131.

Wikipedia (2008). Central Public Library in Bangladesh. www.wikipedia.org