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# **The Role of the Rural Public Library in Community Development and Empowerment**

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## **Abstract**

Public libraries are an important entity in local communities, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities. They are more than shelves of books. Public libraries offer an ever changing range of cultural resources for the community, and they have become a type of social and cultural institution. This article discusses the broadly accepted conceptualization of information for development which accommodates the concepts of advancement of adult literacy and development information for people to improve their economic and social conditions. It reports on early findings of an investigation into the links between community development, empowerment and rural public library usage in Australia and Malaysia.

*Keywords: rural library, rural community, literacy, information seeking, community development and empowerment*

## **Introduction**

The public library can act as an important force for local community development and empowerment and can play a significant role in a community's economic and social development. In this context the public library can be viewed as a social and cultural institution that offers an ever changing range of cultural resources for the community. This can be particularly important in rural and disadvantaged communities. This role for public libraries often remains unrecognized and the major challenge is how to capitalize on the public libraries' potential contribution to community development and empowerment. According to Alan Bundy the challenge is

just how to convey to decision makers the breadth, depth and potential impact on the whole community of the modern public library. It is a rare challenge because no other agency in society has the breadth of role, the user range and diversity and the potential impact. In an age of specialisation and community silos, public libraries are unique. (Bundy 2003 p.6)

While libraries are generally viewed as occupying an important role in the community, little formal research has been conducted to establish their current and potential value to various communities. This article will report on some early findings of an investigation into the community development contribution of rural public libraries in Australia and Malaysia.

## **Community Empowerment and Public Libraries**

Across the world, in both developed and developing countries, the public library's mission in many communities is to equip patrons with equal opportunity of access to resources and to provide that access for 'continuous development of knowledge, personal skills and civic skills and lifelong learning' (Aabo 2005; Yan & Agnes 2009). According to Harrison (1977), the public library can become an intellectual centre of life for the area it serves, providing a vital link for communities with their past, present and future; and a means of access to the knowledge and the information that people need. In reports such as *Libraries/Building/Communities* (State Library of Victoria, 2005) four main ways have been identified by which the public library may contribute to community empowerment. These are

- they provide free public access to computer and information technology resources;
- they help people to locate information thus creating better informed communities;
- they run programs that promote lifelong learning and literacy in the community; and
- they build connections between individuals, groups and government.

State Library of Victoria (SLV) (2005) further indicates that Victorian Public Libraries contribute to social capital, information provision, access to information, lifelong learning and education, and the expansion of social networks in many areas of Victoria. Victorian public libraries have become ‘community hubs’ by providing a place and space for meetings and the exchange of ideas and information. In fact, these communities indicate that projects and programs in Victorian Public Libraries provide them with an environment for interacting with other members who would not normally be their friends or acquaintances (SLV2005). Thus they become more educated, contribute more to the success of their society, create better social networks and become more tolerant of culture, religion and individual differences.

Public libraries in many African communities play a vital role by serving as an important resource for meeting the educational and informational needs of the community, as well as assisting in the process of ‘general upliftment’ of these communities (Moster 1998). Like Australian public libraries they have played a role in building social capital in their communities by providing a public space where citizens can gather and work on personal and community problems. They provide a wide range of innovative and creative programs that bring citizens together and break down the barriers of age, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, language and geography (Kranich 2001). These libraries have become more community oriented through the collection and dissemination of information and knowledge to communities, plus community projects and programs (Kranich 2001; Moster 1998). This phenomenon has created a whole new attitude and understanding of public libraries’ role and focus on the development and empowerment of the communities.

In Southeast Asian countries, there is a growing recognition that public libraries must become an integral part of community socio-economic development dedicated to improving the general quality of life. Public libraries in this region have been quite innovative in relating to communities undertaking programmes such as the ‘Barefoot Librarian’ in Manila, ‘Koran masuk desa’ in Indonesia, the ‘postal loan service’ in Malaysia, the ‘information supermarket’ in Singapore and the ‘tinbox library’ in Thailand (Kibat 1991) Such programmes have positively engaged with their communities.

In Malaysia, public libraries are run mainly by the State Public Library Corporation (in Peninsular Malaysia) and State Library Department (Sabah & Sarawak). There are 921 public

library service outlets throughout the country. These public libraries include: State Libraries (Perpustakaan Negeri), Regional Branch Libraries, Metropolitan Libraries, Town Libraries and Rural Libraries (Zawiyah 2002). The National Library of Malaysia (NLM) is responsible for promoting and facilitating the establishment of a nationwide system of public libraries in keeping with the national standard of provision. NLM also provides various reading promotional programs and activities for the Malaysian communities; and these programs and activities are carried out in accordance with the theme of the National Reading Month. In an effort to gain access to communities all over Malaysia, NLM constantly provides a wider scale of public library services. They bring books to rural folk where there is no library service; they also provide resource persons and supervisors of reading centres to the communities, especially to rural communities.

### **Rural Communities and Rural Libraries**

A rural library is a library or library system that serves a rural community or population that primarily lives on farms and ranches, and in remote communities (Reitz 2004). Kempson (1986) lists three guidelines for creation and operation that should be considered as a definition of rural libraries: the rural library should not solely be based on the provision of printed materials; the rural library should be rooted in the community and for the most part, facilitated by members of that particular community; and the rural library service should be a channel for transferring information both to and from the local community. It is believed that a rural library has an advantage over other communication channels such as media and printed materials in that it can deliver highly personalized services to the village. Dent (2006), writing in an African context, states that there are several general objectives why rural libraries are being developed:

- i. to help the rural children and adults maintain knowledge gained from their education;
- ii. to help a rural community understand the country's social, political and economic endeavours and nation building efforts;
- iii. to aid in the development of wholesome family life, providing materials about social, economic and health care development; and
- iv. to inspire members of the community to read, to use books, information and knowledge access, and to enjoy all materials in the library for education and recreation.

Malaysia is a country that has achieved substantial success in its rural development. In 1998, under The 8<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (RMK8), 36 units of village libraries were planned with a total allocation of RM1,800,000 (AUD590,564) all over Malaysia. In 2003, these rural libraries were equipped with computers and internet services through the Universal Service Provision Programme (USPP). These facilities focus on enhancing the reading habits among rural users and villagers, as well as assisting in enhancing the literacy rate in the rural areas. It is the hope of the Malaysian Government that the rural library will not be seen as just space to provide books; it needs to be seen as a place of engagement and as a learning centre for everyone in a village, regardless of their age and interests. These rural libraries are also built with the purpose of enabling rural society to enjoy a recreational facility that is comprehensive and complete.

Despite the increasing number of rural public libraries built all over Malaysia, currently they are not fully utilized. They are mainly used by school students; meanwhile, the rural community's adults and young adults, in particular, are not making full use of them. In her statement to the press, Perlis State Public Library Director, Norma Mohd Darus, revealed that only 20% of users of rural public libraries are adults, meanwhile 80% of the users are school children and school teenagers (Riss 2006). This situation does not seem to be helping the Malaysian Government in achieving its aim to provide community, social and economic development opportunities for individuals and communities in these rural areas. Public rural libraries need to play a bigger role, providing programs and services that will contribute to the local rural community development as a whole, and not focusing just on students (Farabi 2008).

## **Methodology**

This study focuses on investigating how rural library and information services work within the real life context of rural communities in Australia and Malaysia. This research takes a philosophical approach that combines interpretivist and critical paradigms of social research. The interpretivist approach focuses on understanding the respondents' experiences and the meaning of those experiences from their own perspectives (Sarantakos 2005; Henn, Weinstein et al. 2008). The study takes a critical approach in that it seeks to contribute to

making life better for disadvantaged groups, and has empowerment as a major concern of the research (Sarantakos 2005; Henn, Weinstein et al. 2008).

This research adopts a multiple case study methodology as described by Yin (2009) and Sarantakos (2005), using qualitative methods of personal interview, discussion and observations of group meetings, and examination of documents to investigate the implementation of community development programs and services in six public libraries including three rural public libraries in Malaysia (*CSM1*, *CSM2* and *CM3*) and three public libraries in Australia (*CSA1*, *CSA2* and *CSA3*). The sample for this research was generated using a purposive sampling technique, as suggested by Alston & Bowles (2003). The multiple case study approach is appropriate for gaining an understanding of each individual library service, which is a particular and complex bounded phenomenon; and also to search for patterns across cases. The descriptive nature of the study is appropriate for the area of study where little research has previously been conducted. Moreover using case study methodology enables the investigator to use multiple data sources (such as documentation, archival records, examination of library collection, observation and interviews) and to collect data from all participants involved in the programs (administrative, librarians, information workers, community members and users).

Within this framework, in-depth and semi structured interviews were conducted in a way that allowed a guided conversation to occur in the respondents' own terms, while still providing a thematic guide (Creswell 1998; May 2001; Henn, Weinstein et al. 2008; Creswell 2009; Yin 2009). These interviews involved both users and nonusers of the local rural public libraries (three community members / users – male and female; and three community members / nonusers from each library – male and female) and the service providers (one librarian from each library, and one staff member from the Selangor State Library, Malaysia and one library staff member from the State Library Victoria, Australia and also a group interview and observation in each rural library).

## **Findings**

Early findings from the cross-case analysis of the six case studies indicate medium levels of community involvement, and mixed feedback in relation to the services. These findings elaborate further the social, economic and cultural context of the rural communities and also the rural public library services, activities and programs provided to each local community. The findings are presented under the headings of community involvement, satisfaction with

the rural library programs, services and activities, and contribution to community development.

### Community Involvement

Chang and Hsieh (1997) explain that library users' involvement in a public library can be categorised into three levels: a) high involvement b) medium involvement and c) low involvement. These levels of involvement will influence the library users' decision processes and patterns of attitudes towards specific services, activities or programs run by the rural public library. At the higher levels of involvement, users will tend to give more careful consideration to information that is relevant to particular needs and will engage in a more extended decision process. As the involvement level decreases, library users will tend to engage in more routine types of activities, such as reading newspapers and magazines.

**Table 1: Chang and Hsieh (1997) Library User's Involvement with Public Library**

High involvement	Database searching Reference consulting Interlibrary loans
<u>Medium involvement</u>	<b>Reference collection consulting</b> <b>Book borrowing</b> <b>Materials photocopying</b>
Low involvement	Programme attendance News browsing Using facilities for personal study

This research found that in both Australia and Malaysia, library users' involvement in their local rural public libraries was typically at a medium level. Respondent feedback shows that the library users utilise current rural public library services for predominantly personal, non formal and entertainment activities and services, such as borrowing books, magazines, DVDs and reading newspapers. From time to time, people do come for internet access but again for personal and non formal use.



*“...here I normally use the internet to read my email, borrow books and sometimes magazines too.”*

**CSM1: User 1**

*“I was awarded as the most active member in the year 2007,...I always borrow books from the library...”*

**CSM2: User 2**

*“... I always use the internet and borrow many magazines from here... I can spend my time here. I think I've borrowed all the books of my interest from the library (laugh).”*

**CSM3: User 2**

*“Just borrowing ... I look up things in the library, but I take things home to read.”*

**CSA1: User1**

*“...we (family) borrow so many books, probably 40 a week. The kids just love it.”*

**CSA2:User1**

*“I always bring my daughter to the toddler activities, I borrow books ...I also do some reference searching.”*

**CSA3: User 3**

It seems that that these rural public libraries fulfil the information needs of their community members. Nevertheless, there is still a relatively low level of usage by residents in the community. This may be due to a lack of awareness of the services that the public library has to offer. Alternatively, it may reflect a personal dissatisfaction with the kind or the quality of service initially received from the library. Rural public library services, activities and programs appear to be supporting mainly the children and teenage adults' needs.

*“...the children especially, enjoy the services and programs held here in the library...”*

**CSM1: User 1**

*“We are very grateful with the building of this library. But, I guess is not fair for me to use the word all...because generally, the children gain more benefits from this library...”*

**CSM1: User 3**

*“Good (relationship), but I guess it is just good for us the youngster not the older people...but now I can see more teenagers come around and use the library...”*

**CSM2: User 1**

*“The young adults and children might be more alert to the relationship that they have with the library, for us the guardian (parents), we see the library as a place for knowledge and intellectual development for our kids.”*

**CSM3: User 1**

*“It is positive (the relationship)...but it has been bad lately, but I think a lot of people think that a library is necessary but don’t use them and I don’t think that’s the library’s fault, they don’t alienate people...”*

**CSAI: User 3**

Even in Australia, many of the activities and programs run by the local rural libraries are mainly children focussed. Nevertheless, the parents do get involved and participate as much as they could.

### **Satisfaction with the Rural Library Program, Services, and Activities**

In relation satisfaction with the types of program, activities and services provided in each local rural public library, library users from Australia and Malaysia have given very different feedback. In Selangor, Malaysia, there is an abundance of tension and frustration with the resources (services), activities and programs provided by the rural public library.

*“... the loan service is quite left behind. For users that come to the library occasionally, find that the books are out dated...current programs are okay, but it always half way.”*

**CSMI: User 1**

*“... they need to bring more new books...”*

**CSMI: User 2**

*“... for the past 1 ½ years, my kids and me seldom borrow books anymore, because there is no more new books for us to read here.”*

**CSMI: User 3**

#### **Problem 1:**

Resources are not up to date – the books and magazines provided in these libraries are too old and out dated and not much interesting new information can be found in the current rural libraries.

#### **Problem 2:**

Current resources are not geared to the needs of the community. Service providers fail to relate the local community background of social and economic life with the information needs of the local community members.

#### **Problem 3:**

Presently, there is no inter library loan system between the local rural libraries or with the State Library. All communication between library users and service providers still uses the conventional ways.

Australian library users in other hand reported more satisfaction with the current services, programs and activities provided in their local rural public library.

*“... What I like is that the fact that when they (the librarian) have new books they display it prominently...”*

**CSA1: User 1**

*“I think they offer a lot...”*

**CSA1: User 2**

*“...I think they do numbers of story time like for different young kids...once a month they have after school activity where they have a learning theme...on myths and legend of the ancient Egypt...”*

**CSA2: User 1**

*“...the rhyme times on Wednesday like today, it has been great, it has been a great way to meet new parents and new friends too.”*

**CSA2: User 2**

*“...they (rural public library) keep circulation among the libraries, and they buy new material, and ones that haven't been borrowed for a long time, they sell it off.*

**CSA3: User 1**

*“They (rural public library) just seem to have more wide range of resources than before, and draw more people here.*

**CSA3: User 3**

*Advantage 1:*

The librarian and the library staff manage to display and promote all new books among library users and community members.

*Advantage 2:*

Proper planning and promotion of activities and programs run by the rural library staff and librarian.

*Advantage 3:*

Good circulation of resources among local rural public libraries and with the state library.

## **Contribution to Community Development**

Library users and librarians, regardless of their degree of satisfaction with their local rural public library, endorsed the importance of having a public library in their community. They concur that currently their rural public library makes a vital contribution to the community, especially for their children's self development.

*"...so far when there is any program held by the library, many will participate and give their support. Programs that they enjoy a lot are like – drawing competitions for kids and some sports activities for the parent...yes, this library has helped us (housewives) and our children in many ways."*

**CSM1: User 1**

*"Yes, it's good (service)...they keep circulation among the libraries, and they buy new material, and once that haven't been borrowed for a long time, they sell it off....I'll say with my children, I think they got a lot out of it (rural library service, activities and programs). Because we are very actively involved in reading...I think it is a terrific developmental resource, but just for me and my wife it is really just for entertainment."*

**CSA3: User 1**

*"Library is very important for school children and high school kids."*

**CSM3: Non Library User1**

*"... they (kids and young adult) definitely do use it...so it needs to be there for them otherwise...what else are they going to do? Jump on the computer again and spend more time in front of the screen?"*

**CSA2: Non Library User2**

*"Yes, but again more to the children benefits...I guess. Our members are mostly children, parents will come and drop their children here and pick them up a couple of hours later and the parents normally are not members of this library."*

**CSM1: Librarian**

*"Yes, they do help. Like this Baby Rhyme times...it will all come from the library budget...and the support from the community is good. It's not a huge number, I would like to have more mums around but..Yeah"*

**CSA3: Librarian**

*"...this library does bring much benefit to some of the community members here, maybe not to the adults, but to the children, teenagers and some house wives like to come here too."*

**CSM1: Library Staff**

*“I think the rural public library is one of the most valued services in local communities. I do think people who are managing public libraries in rural areas are very creative in offering their services and I think they have been very ahead of their game and developing partnerships in their community, they really do know their community and they have very strong links with community.”*

*CSA: State Library Staff*

## **Conclusion**

People talk about community development in many different ways. Some describe it as improving a quality of life; some think it is all about building community networks while others believe it is about empowering individuals and communities. In a traditional community development model, community developers work with groups of people to help them reach their goals, and these goals could be anything from providing more public washrooms in a community, to mobilizing community members to participate in an arts project.

In a public library, librarians and staff members work with community members so that they can understand what the community needs from the library, in order for them to improve their quality of life. The librarians and staff members work with communities to understand how the public library can help them reach their goals. In a public library context, community development also means building relationships with people. By providing access to current resources and technology, a public library successfully allows itself to go beyond a simple consultation or support process and expand into meaningful and inclusive collaborations, building stronger relationships and partnerships within its community. But the most important thing is that successful community development, especially in small rural communities, depends heavily on the success of its public library in identifying information needs and contributing to the future of the community.

In many developing countries, a literacy campaign is incomplete, and will falter, without the backup of an effective public library service to develop and carry on from where the school leaves off. Meanwhile, with growing complexities of the present day society and the increasing demands for information, it is important for more community development-oriented activities to supplement traditional library services in developing nations. Active small and rural public libraries can add significantly to the quality of life in rural communities.

Current rural public libraries contribute many great development efforts and knowledge to rural communities especially children and young adults. This investigation into community development with the local rural public library has shown that communities are aware of the existence of rural public libraries. They use them and embrace them for their own benefit. Most of the programs, services and activities are geared to the needs and expectations of the community members and the community believes that the rural public library makes a vital contribution to the community, especially children. However, users of the Malaysian rural public libraries included in this study indicated that outdated materials and limited services constrained the usefulness of these library services.

The early findings of this research indicate that the community development potential of the rural public library remains only partially realised. More could be done to assist this institution to grow together with the community around it. The rural public libraries are ideally situated, and have the foundations in place to play a greater role in community development. The next stage of this research will further explore the data, and link the findings with contemporary ideas about community development in order to make recommendations about the future community development and empowerment role of rural public libraries in Malaysia.

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