

Little Free Libraries as agents of Community Outreach and Sustainability in North-East India

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Abstract

“People are at the center of sustainable development,” states the UN General Assembly in their 2014 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s). For a society to be truly sustainable, it must also be “just, equitable and inclusive.” Thus, sustainable efforts must not only include fighting climate change and limiting fossil fuels, but also arming people with education, literacy, and access. By providing access to information, libraries play an important role in promoting literacy, education and lifelong learning, promoting Community Development: Libraries are often seen as community hubs, where people can come together to learn, connect, and engage with knowledge. As a global movement, Little Free Libraries aim to encourage children to trade books and promote sustainable reading culture, while making used books more accessible to everyone. The paper describes an approach to community outreach and sustainability in lifelong learning, promotion of literacy and human development through Little Free Libraries in Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The paper also stressed how the Free Libraries have an impact on the people and how it encourages reading among the general mass.

Keywords: Little Free Libraries, Community Outreach, Sustainability, Reading habits, communities, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh

1. Introduction

Libraries have been staunch partners of universities, institutions, and organizations in the advancement of the communities’ goals and aspirations. Libraries, more than ever, are being recognized as an important hub to facilitate development and transformation. As Ashraf (2018) described, libraries empower and democratize institutions to engage communities by “outreaching and taking up expansive roles which are confined to not only serving as information resource but much more. Libraries have started engaging with local communities by transforming themselves as socio-cultural & capacity building hubs globally”. Such presence equates to continue innovation, strategic inclusive representations and carefully thought-out programs and services. Community outreach and engagement is at the heart of every library advocacy strategy. These activities inform and engage people about the services and programmes.



Academic libraries' are suitably positioned in higher education as these institutions are mainly committed to supporting diversity through education, outreach, and advocacy. It is important that libraries dedicate to practice "turning outward", a step-by-step process developed by The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. The process enables libraries to immerse themselves in steps to better understand communities; participate and encourage conversations that are community-focused; being proactive to community issues; and putting community aspirations first (The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, 2013).

Libraries are poised to amplify such efforts as librarians worldwide positively contributed to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Global Vision (2017), an extensive site that compiles ideas of librarians. IFLA marked the importance of understanding community needs to better design our services as an opportunity for a united global action to address challenges. This serves as an opportunity for libraries to explore and expand library outreach – engage new stakeholders, build tailor-made programs with measurable impact on peoples' lives (IFLA, n.d.).

1.1 What and Why of Community Outreach?

Community Outreach and engagement are two distinct ways to connect with your community. Outreach is one-way communication that tells community members about an issue, problem, opportunity, or decision. Outreach can be postcards sent to homeowners, fliers placed throughout a community, website postings, and meeting announcements. Community outreach involves providing professional services, or services of a specific expertise, to a group of people who may not otherwise have access to those services. It is performed where those in need are located. Proactive outreach, strategic partnerships, diverse programming, technological resources, inclusivity initiatives, and continuous evaluation strengthen their connections with the community and fulfill their role as vibrant hubs of learning and enrichment.

1.2 Community Outreach for Improving the Lives of Communities

Community outreach refers to a range of activities by an individual, organization or institution that are actively engaged and involve initiatives that aim to improve the well-being of the society, especially to the marginalized and disadvantaged. Community outreach acts as important agents as it can empower people to participate in decision making that affects their lives and advocate for their rights and interests. It involves efforts made by individuals and institutions to connect the society which helps in fostering relationships, building trust and collaborating with others.

Community outreach workers provide help to those most in need of assistance. They can work at nonprofit organizations, schools, or as the primary contact with a community. The importance of community outreach is reflected in the improved social, education, health and economic outcomes of those who benefit from outreach programs.

At its core, community outreach helps communities function better. Social workers who practice community outreach may work directly with individuals, assessing their needs and then guiding them to the appropriate

resources. Others design large-scale programs that benefit the entire community. The work of community outreach can impact different segments of the population.

2. Little Free Library as agents of community outreach

Community outreach on sustainability can be defined as the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) initiatives to engage with the communities in its surroundings in a mutually beneficial process of sustainable development. Therefore, community outreach on sustainability promotes an inclusive process of planning and development, also assisting members of the community to achieve their personal goals. These initiatives contribute to increase the legitimacy of the HEI in the community while improving quality of life.

Educators recognize the ecological, economic, and social components of environmental sustainability. For community-based programs, there is another sustainability trio that, if neglected, will lead to a decline in program quality and function. To be sustainable over the long term, community-based programs must have superior educational quality, clear organizational structure, and continued financial stability.

Little Free Libraries can indeed serve as powerful agents of community outreach. Here are several ways in which these small books- sharing boxes can foster community engagement and outreach.

2.1 Promoting literacy

Little Free Libraries provide access to free books for people of all ages and backgrounds. By making reading materials readily available in public spaces, these libraries help promote literacy and a love for reading within the community. This outreach can be especially impactful in areas with limited access to traditional libraries or bookstores.

2.2 Building social connection

Little Free Libraries often serve as gathering points where community members can interact, share recommendations, and engage in discussions about books and other topics. These interactions help social connections and foster a sense of community among residents, contributing to stronger and more cohesive neighborhood.

2.3 Encouraging diversity and inclusivity

Little Free Libraries can be stocked with a wide range of books representing diverse perspectives, genres, and languages. By offering a variety of reading materials, these libraries promote inclusivity and encourage community members to explore new ideas and cultures, fostering a more diverse and inclusive community.

2.4 Supporting education

Little Free Libraries can be used to distribute educational materials, resources and information about local events and services. By serving as information hubs, these libraries help support lifelong learning and provide valuable resources to community members, including children, students, and adults seeking further education.

2.5 Empowering community-led initiatives

Little Free Libraries are often established and maintained by local residents, community groups, or organizations. By empowering individuals to take ownership of these initiatives, Little Free Libraries encourage community members to become actively involved in improving their neighborhoods and fostering a sense of ownership and pride in their community.

2.6 Promoting cultural exchange

Little Free Libraries can showcase books and materials from different cultures, languages and traditions, promoting cross-cultural understanding and dialogue within the community. By facilitating the exchange of ideas and perspectives, these libraries help promote a more inclusive and culturally rich community.

Overall, Little Free Libraries serve as valuable tools for community outreach, bringing people together, promoting literacy, supporting education, fostering social connections, and empowering individuals to create positive change within their communities. By leveraging the power of books and reading, these libraries play a vital role in building strong, vibrant, and connected communities.

3. Little Free Libraries for Sustainable Development

“People are at the center of sustainable development,” states the UN General Assembly in their 2014 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s). For a society to be truly sustainable, it must also be “just, equitable and inclusive.” Thus, sustainable efforts must not only include fighting climate change and limiting fossil fuels, but also arming people with education, literacy, and access.

Little Free Libraries fosters neighborhood book exchanges around the world. These small, accessible book-sharing boxes are typically placed in public spaces, encouraging a sense of community, literacy, and sharing among residents. While the direct connection between Little Free Libraries and sustainable development may not be immediately obvious, there are several ways in which these grassroots initiatives can contribute to sustainable initiatives and to achieve sustainable development goals:

3.1 Promoting literacy and education

Little Free Libraries provide free access to books, which can help improve literacy rates and foster a love for reading within communities. Improved literacy and education are key components of sustainable development as they empower individuals and communities to make informed choices and participate more fully in society.

3.2 Encouraging community engagement

Little Free Libraries often serve as focal points for community gatherings and interactions. By promoting community engagement and social cohesion, these mini-libraries help strengthen social networks and build resilient communities, which are essential for sustainable development.

3.3 Reducing waste and promoting reuse

By facilitating the sharing and exchange of books, Little Free Libraries promote the reuse of resources and reduce the demand for new materials. This can help minimize waste generation and contribute to a more sustainable, circular economy.

3.4 Supporting local economies

Little Free Libraries can showcase authors and support independent publishers, thereby contributing to the local economy and promoting cultural diversity. By fostering a culture of reading and learning, these initiatives can also help create a more knowledgeable and skilled workforce, which is essential for sustainable development.

3.5 Promoting environment awareness

Some Little Free Libraries incorporate sustainable practices, such as using recycled materials for construction or featuring books on environmental topics. By raising awareness about environmental issues and promoting eco-friendly practices, these initiatives can help contribute to a more sustainable and environmentally conscious society.

3.6 Fostering resilience and self-reliance

Little Free Libraries empower communities to take ownership of their resources and create shared spaces for learning and collaboration. By fostering a sense of self-reliance and resilience, these libraries help communities adapt to change, address local needs, and build a more sustainable future.

Overall, while the impact of individual Little Free Libraries on sustainable development may be relatively small, collectively these initiatives can play a significant role in promoting education, community building, resource reuse, and environmental awareness- all of which are essential components of a sustainable and resilient society.

4. Little Free Library Initiatives in Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh

4.1 Initiatives in Mizoram

Nowadays, with so much dependence on the Internet for information in everyday lives, the fundamental role that libraries play in learning is hardly felt.

The tiny roadside libraries called “Little Free Libraries”, a unique concept of spreading wisdom when people read and take books for free have no visitors register, staff to manage the transaction and no security to keep a check on them but a simple rule that reads: “take a book, leave a book”. People not only read and take books but also donate them.

The concept of having Free Libraries was not known to Mizoram before 2016.

Inspired by the global movement that began in Hudson, Wisconsin in 2009, the challenge of installing non-profit mini roadside libraries in Aizawl, Mizoram was felt to help the community and to impart best practices to the society for no personal gains. The organizers who are interested in promoting literacy, reading and building community, started and introduced the first two Little Free Libraries in Mizoram on 20th December 2017 to turn the dream into a reality and to create The Little Free Library Movement in the region. The chain reaction was very positive as at least two more Little Free Libraries came up in the city a year later.

The organizers received great feedback and it was worthwhile to expand the idea beyond their own domain and news about the Little Library spread through Newspapers, Facebook and other social Medias which led to the making of a documentary in 2021 on the theme Little Free Libraries helps to revive reading culture in North- East States. Times Travel on February 26, 2020 wrote:

It came to fore when an IFS officer tweeted a photo of the library and wrote, “Now this is what every city must copy. Mizoram’s capital Aizawl has a couple of these tiny roadside libraries. Libraries are the best investment for nation-building. North-east showing the way”.

The response from the public, especially students, motivated college authorities to set up three more Free Libraries for the public in the year 2020. The purpose of this movement was to install Little Free Libraries around the state within rural and underserved communities to promote better access to quality resources. With citizen leadership, there was ongoing communication among Little Library stewards and Little Library owners who proudly shared photos of their newly installed libraries which captured the attention of passers-by. When citizens feel their actions can have a direct impact, they are more than willing to take some leadership and contribute to the overall direction of the initiative. The commitment of the Little Library stewards to inculcate and promote reading habits among the people had been justified by their actions which as a result brought positive response from the public and some of them have begun their interests in books through the little libraries.

Little Libraries promote reading, illiteracy and neighborhood engagement, three things that are important for the health, vitality and quality of life of any community. People say they have been more inclined to pick up a book when walking by the library out of both curiosity and pleasure. The Little Libraries signify the community that values civic participation, education and connection.

4.2 Initiatives in Arunachal Pradesh

Inspired by the several ‘Little Free Libraries’ (LFLs) that have sprung up in Aizawl by members of a small library movement in Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh also took this initiative. The venture in a state with a fairly high literacy rate has led two sisters in the border state of Arunachal Pradesh to follow suit by establishing Little Free Libraries in three remote districts- Papum Pare, Kurung Kumey and Tirap.

As stated by the duo: “The idea of a street library was inspired by the Mizoram Street Library project, where people were seen musing the books sitting and standing for hours or more from a small wooden shelf attached to a public wall.”

The Free Libraries were started with an initial fund of Rs. 10,000 for books and an equal amount for wooden shelves. Today, the 26 odd street libraries, some simply consisting of racks in the services of trees, have their own stories to tell. The Free Libraries as they were called “Street Libraries” are set up to persist with its humanitarian and educational efforts to inculcate reading habits in children. This included luring them with treats and gifts, once the excitement of seeing new books had faded.

Through partnerships with various educational, cultural and non-profit institutions such as the Paparan Pare district Collector’s office in the state, the people who had taken the initiatives had been able to amplify its outreach and impact literacy. These partnerships along with contributions from several other individuals and entities, enabled the project’s gradual launch of the second phase in 2021-2022 to eventually become a state wide movement and received support from the British Council, Roli Books and even authors like Bee Rowlett, a British journalist and feminist author.

5. Conclusions

Libraries are important because they provide access to information, promote reading culture and contribute to the development of individuals and society. Libraries offer a wide range of resources which help individuals in various fields. Little Free Libraries exemplify the synergy between community engagement and sustainability practices, creating invaluable hubs of knowledge exchange and neighborly connectivity. The initiatives of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh on Little Free Library cultivate community bonds and promote literacy through accessible book exchanges in public areas, contributing to a more inclusive and informed society. This initiative can also be implemented in many other states within the country by launching awareness to the society and establishing partnership with stakeholders in the local community to help in ensuring the culture of reading, connectivity and sustainability within the community.

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