

## **Key Lessons Learned from Working with Community Libraries**

Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation was founded in 2008 in response to Cyclone Nargis to revitalize 2,000 community libraries destroyed by the cyclone. Over the period of 14 years, MBAPF has been working with thousands of community libraries across the country. We will be discussing the following points as key lessons learned from working with community libraries.

### **What is Community Library**

They are founded by youths, village leaders, influential persons from the community, monks, and pastors. They are treated as Trusted Organizations of the community. They normally have a library committee and board. Some libraries even have other committees such as outreach programme committee, community engagement committee, and library steering committee. According to our data collection, Myanmar has around 6,000 community libraries across the country and it can be considered as the greatest number of hidden treasures.

We have found out the following strength and challenges of community libraries.

### **A. Strength**

#### **1. Ownership**

Community libraries have a sense of “Ownership”; meaning they felt that they belong to the community. Their main objective is to serve to the community needs. They can easily mobilize volunteers, get trainers, and connect the community's supply and demand. For example, community libraries in the Central Dry Zone organize donation of water during the period of draught. Ownership is one of the key factors in bringing the sustainability of every project that we work.

#### **2. Activities for Community Needs**

Normally, people think of books or catalogues or circulation when people taught about libraries. Very few people think that they are serving as ICT training centres, soft skill training centres, information sharing centres for migrant workers, project management training and leadership training for girls. Through our Beyond Access Myanmar library project, we have been conducting

digital and information literacy training, ICT training, Tech Age Girl Myanmar project and safe migration centre successfully.

At the same time, many community libraries conduct outreach programmes to reach to neighbourhood villages and communities. For example, they use motorbikes as mobile library to carry the books to other villages.

### **3. Neutrality**

Community libraries serve as neutral ground in respect to gender, race, religion or ethnicity. In Myanmar rural culture, boys are able to go to tea shop where they can learn from their peers. However, it is not the culture for girls so that they don't have a safe place as learning in the rural. When, community libraries open door for girls as learning centres in our project in Tech Age Girl Myanmar project, parents feel safe to send their daughters to libraries. Please see the following video for brief introduction of the project which was implemented with support from Microsoft.

<https://youtu.be/9tJVwUNYxwo>

Another good example is "Reading Together" project which is being implemented at 30 community libraries in the Rakhine State. We are using the space of community library as neutral ground to bring both sides of conflicted environment.

### **4. Partnership**

Community libraries normally partner with writers or publishers group to get support for their libraries. Some libraries are creative that they partner with artist group to train painting for kids.

When we launched "Let's Read" project with Room To Read, community librarians partner with parent teacher association and other community influential persons to get support for their libraries.

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### **5. Flexibility**

Unlike the government run libraries, these community libraries do not have much of the red tapes. Normally, once the library committee decides with majority votes, they can carry out the project. Results can be achieved and visible in a short period of time also. This means a lot when we carry monitoring and evaluation survey. It is very easy to get it done unlike government run libraries where we need to get permission from the central ministry.

## **B. Areas to Improve**

### **1. Infrastructure**

Sometimes, they are lacking basic infrastructure such as reading tables suitable for young children. They may need a variety of books that are suitable for children of all ages. That is why we supply thousands of books to each library according to our Ideal Book Collection (IBC) which was developed from available books from the market. Therefore, we have been supporting free Wi-Fi and digital devices under our project, Beyond Access Myanmar.

In other words, we need to support the initial heavy lifting part such as these infrastructures.

### **2. Methodological issues**

Proper Monitoring and Evaluation procedures and protocol have to be given to the librarians. Below is one example of issue that we have faced when we conducted the literacy assessment under the Let's Read project. We have documented four methodological issues as follows:

#### **1. Selection of assessment site:**

Although the assessment was meant to be organized with children who attend the libraries, some libraries outreached neighbouring schools and administered the assessment with children from those schools. The rationale behind this method was that the libraries found it easier to mobilize children to participate in the assessment in schools than in libraries.

One library carried out the assessment with children who have never come and read books at this library.

#### **2. Selection of children:**

Some libraries, mainly school libraries selected specific children to take part in the assessment because they had higher probability to have high scores.

Also children who participated in the first reading assessment and in the latter ones were not same in some of the libraries.

#### **3. Timing:**

The interval between the first and second assessment was not the same among the libraries. Some libraries had many months between the first and second one. It was also discovered that a few libraries only had 2-3 months between the first and second assessment.

#### **4. Setting:**

One challenge raised by a few librarians was the difficulty with the library space to administer the assessment. As the space was too small to let children take the assessment altogether, some libraries had to divide them into groups of five or six to administer the assessment and it took too long to organize the assessment. Most importantly, children who were waiting in line to take already knew the answers to the questions.

As the reading literacy assessment developed by adapting the tool of the Ministry of Education Non-Formal Education Department was found too easy for children and showed some limitations to reflect the literacy level of all children with diverse characteristics, the project team led the process of revising the assessment tool by hiring an external consultant. Based on the information collected, we develop the customized three different assessment tools for ages of (7-9), (10-12) and (13-15) which are operational, easy to be used by librarians and child friendly.

**3. Human resource:** Many community libraries faced the issue of limited human resource and it is challenging to recruit volunteers. So the man power is not enough to extend the coverage of library services. Another issue is the retention rate of librarians and for some libraries, the librarians change frequently as most of them are working as volunteer basis. There was an issue in understanding and continuing for some projects' activities unless systematic sharing practice among library team members is applied. Proper system of volunteerism has to be adopted by the libraries.

**4. Financial resource:** The financial resource is one of the most critical factors for community libraries in implementing the activities, expanding library service, and ensuring sustainability. The libraries faced difficulties in raising funds for the library. The budget is quite limited for community libraries and the most could only utilize the expenditure of under 100 USD monthly

#### **5. Capacity and Training**

Traditionally, some librarians think that only cataloguing and circulating books are the major task for librarians. Since 2013-14, MBAPF has been instilling a sense of 21st-century librarians' skills into community librarians. Modern 21<sup>st</sup>-century librarians should be learning soft skills, digital and information literacy skills, project management, and other leadership skills. Although community librarians and volunteers have been trained for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, it is found that effectiveness, efficiency of library activities and sustainability of library will also depend on education level, creativity, and commitment of single individual librarians or library lead.

One good example is "Community Engagement Training" under the "Let's Read" project where we taught our community librarians how to engage effectively to get community participation.

## **6.Competitive Application Process**

It is very important to understand the strength and weaknesses of each and every library that we work with to be successful in every project that we work. When a project is about to launch, we normally announce to our library network and a competitive application process is mandatory. We have developed selection criteria for the libraries and depending on their commitment, scalability and most importantly presence of sense of ownership for their community development are key factors in bringing the success for the project.

MBAPF has been implementing the following projects with various partners sustainably even during difficult times like Covid and political instability.