

THE “OPEN ACCESS” (OA) MOVEMENT AND INFORMATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

DidiBahini Youth Forum

Background

DidiBahini Youth Forum called on different participants to discuss the impact and implications of Open Access in the South Asian Region. All 11 participants are computer literate and familiar with IT and the use of Internet. Six women and five men participated in the discussion between the ages of 16 to 40 years old from different caste, class, community and educational background.

The explanation on the idea of open access started the discussion of participants looking at both the advantages and the challenges of the accessibility of OA specifically in the South Asian Region considering its economic and social conditions.

Advantages and Challenges of OA in South Asia

Open Access has both its advantages and challenges not only in Nepal but also in the whole South Asian Region.

Advantages

- Information can be gathered faster and a lot easier. Therefore saves time
- Different information regarding a certain country or region such as Development and social issues, health, education, geographical location, politics, culture etc. can easily be gathered for organization and personal use
- Information, research studies and articles are cheaply available via OA since documents can either be downloaded and printed as oppose to buying expensive books or reading materials
- People have access to instant updated information
- OA can also provide a two-way communication. Topics or studies that need clarification or comments can easily be responded to
- This gives opportunity for individuals, communities, regions to share their learning and experiences globally
- It provides platform for people to show and share their creativity
- OA also creates the opportunity to form a global network

Challenges in Nepal

- OA is not accessible to all since 40% of Nepalese people are living below the poverty line.
- If computers are available, electricity is not reliable or there are no phone lines to access the Internet.

- According to Central Bureau of Statistic (2001) 54.1% of Nepal's population are literate, among them 42.8% are female and 65.5% are male. The youth literacy (population of 16-24 year) is 69.4%. In total 59.2% is female and 80.2% is male. Adult literacy (Population 15 years and above) is 48.4%, out of this 34.9% is female and 62.7% is male. Some people who are literate are not familiar with the use of computer.

Discussion

People in South Asia including Nepal are somewhat similar in social, economic and political condition, so that the advantages and the challenges can be comparatively the same.

Although the whole world is into IT advancement and there is a rapid increase of Internet facilities, information provided over the net is still not accessible to all. Most places in South Asia that have access to Internet facility are urban areas. Computer and Internet are sometimes available in rural areas; however accessibility could still be a challenge due to less phone lines and unreliable power supply. Some people living in the village areas do not even know about Internet or computers. For example, none of DidiBahini's field office has computer access. Parsa, one of DidiBahini's field offices located in the Terai region is near the Indian boarder. However, there is no computer and Internet available. Though In Kathmandu valley, computers are widely available and Internet is accessible, this could mean about 30 minutes bus ride from DidiBahini resource centre. Therefore the availability of computer and Internet in the resource centres can give opportunity to local communities to explore and access different information available through the net.

Although our neighbouring country, India, is one of the IT world leaders, they still have to reach a point of making IT available in all areas of their own backyard. On the other hand, countries like China and Korea are producing cheaper computers that can make information through Internet accessible to more people. This will allow people in South Asia to have different information available for them, especially information on education, health, economic growth, political, social etc will readily be available. For example, awareness in peace and conflict resolution or successfully empowerment and advocacy project for women empowerment would be useful.

Young people use the resource centre anytime of the day. At DidiBahini, they come to read on recent events about the country and the world, youth activities, general information and entertainment magazines. Whenever they have a chance to access the Internet, they use it basically to research development related issues and youth activities. The information they gather is shared as an informal discussion to update and increase their learning.

The concept of having an OA can provide vast information on global perspectives of development issues. It gives people the privilege to access cheaper information from professionals of different backgrounds and experiences. Valuable information on a certain topic or issue are cheaper compared to buying a whole book, when information needed from the book is only one chapter.

There is also an opportunity to replicate successful projects or programmes and technology. OA can also generate creative ideas to come up with development programmes that can be shared to people all over the world having the same issues or concerns. This also creates an opening for people globally to innovate from different ideas and adopt them in their own cultural context.

Sharing the information on culture, tradition, geography, etc. can help a country like Nepal in its economic growth, e.g. it can encourage, tourism or foreign investments. Also, organisations in Nepal want to share different information regarding their work, research findings, development approaches, and success stories that can help other countries working in the same issues. At the same time developing countries can also get different programme support from international organisations that share the same mission/vision and current social concerns as they do.

OA has also its different challenges and reality to face, such as Copyrights. There is a possibility of misuse and misinterpretation of information. Since it is readily available, people can easily have information printed and claim it their own. There is also a possibility of misinterpretation of a certain study or research due to different cultural and educational background.

Since OA can only be readily available to people who have access to computer and Internet, there will be no direct participation of the grassroots. The nature of information that is shared through OA are mostly research, this means that they can still have the opportunity to express their ideas, opinion and experiences, though can be limited as to the topic or issue. However, since mostly men have access to information, even among young adults, it is important to gather information that represent both gender equally.

Nepalese language is widely used and accessible in the Internet. Although English is not common in daily use, most of the development workers have a good command of the language and IT skills to access and share the information. Some websites accessible in Nepal provide information in both English and Nepalese, so that literate community people can access easily. Information available through Internet need not only be print, which has language limitation. It can also be through audio-visual tools such as documentary films and pictures that can be shared among the community.

Conclusion

Open access is beneficial and can be a good tool for development through globalisation. With the current IT trend there is a possibility of having OA made more available to people worldwide.

Although India is one of the leaders in IT expansion, the region has yet to reached a remarkable number of people that can access IT information. However, those who have OA available to them will have great advantage and opportunity to be aware on different development issues and trends that can be shared by different organisation to local people who have no direct access to OA. At same time people from the region can also share local technology that can be helpful and replicated in other countries. Thus OA will have a great impact on development in the region through global learning and sharing of good practices, ideas and experiences.

DidiBahini is an NGO based in Nepal that is committed to achieving gender equality through a participatory learning approach. DidiBahini has established Resource Centres in different districts to be used as platform for development workers to gather and update information on gender and development related issues for dissemination to the general public. The DidiBahini Youth Forum encourages young people to use their skills, talents and knowledge for betterment of the community. www.didibahini.org