

## Information Support for Development Studies

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### Abstract

This article deals with various issues connected with information provisions for decision making and problem solving in socio-economic development. States that the history of development literature could be traced to the Second World War period. After breakdown of the colonial rule, many developing nations are engaged in the task of nation building activities to improve the quality of life of their population.

Access to information on development literature, which is mostly available in grey format, is a complex task. Many funding agencies have provided support for establishing national, regional and international information network like DEVSIS, DEVINSA and DEVLIN. Some of such literature can be accessed through Internet, however, because of various reasons there is a big gap (i) between the level of information support available between different region, between nations and inside a country; (ii) between information haves and information havenots; (iii) and in the demand and supply of information. The author suggests that only inter and intra-disciplinary approach can provide effective information support in this area. The exchange of knowledge and experience through Networks can speedup the process of problem solving and decision making in a development. Helping each other through TCDC modality may help in upgrading information services in this area.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The period of last fifty years or so can be called as the era of development. Its history can be traced after the second World War which led to the breakdown of colonial rule in most of the 'Third World'. On 20th January 1949, the US President Truman, for the first time, called the South as underdeveloped region of the world, and thus a new era was opened for that part of the world—an era of development. On this day, the President Truman announced a new

programme for extending the benefits of American scientific advanced and industrial progress to this underdeveloped region in the world.

At the initial stage this term 'development' was used by its promoters to stand for 'economic growth' and therefore during the early 1960's development planners were mainly concerned with issues such as Gross National Products (GNP), and income distribution, later on human development indices were also included in the scope of this to refine the term.

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Development, whether social, economic, or cultural is however too complex a

phenomenon to be appropriately covered under a discipline like 'development economics'. It is influenced by various factors such as ideology, faith, cultural impact, local issues and national capacity as well as capability. It may be pointed out that the terms 'economic growth' and 'development' are not synonymous and therefore it is essential to adopt a wholistic approach, so as to understand, the scope of the term 'development'.

In most of the developing countries agriculture has traditionally been the major source of national income. Some of them have been able to develop an industrial base and are in the process to enter the information era. Developmental efforts in countries which are at the early stages of development are mainly directed towards meeting the basic needs of the population like housing, clothing, health, education, food etc. Several other countries however are trying not only to eliminate poverty, but also to achieve sustained economic development. A few such countries which have achieved a satisfactory level of industrial development are trying to invest some resource in information sector as well.

Undoubtedly, many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America are presently engaged in the task of national development with the aim to upgrade the lifestyle and improve the standard of living of their population.

## 2. INFORMATION SUPPORT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Access to local information and statistical data of developing countries is generally complex because of their unsatisfactory bibliographical control and availability mostly in grey format. Because of inadequate resources for library and information services, the developing countries do not give them due importance in the allocation of funds for information support. However, several funding agencies such as UNDP, IDRC and UN Economic Commission in different regions have extended support for development of information systems like DEVSIS: Africa, DEVSIS: Asia, and at sub-regional level DEVINSA (DEVSIS stands for Development Science Information System).

Several information systems such as POPLINE, and SPINE have also been established. Though some of these information systems are mission-oriented yet the information included in their scope directly or indirectly is found useful for the developmental studies. Following is the list of some of the major information systems and services in development studies at international, regional and national level.

### 2.1 International Level

The United Nations Organisation (UNO) has been playing a vital role in the development of various international information systems through its different agencies. They collect, organise and disseminate large amount of information and make it available to the users at a comparatively low price. *The Directory of United Nations Databases and Information Systems* contains information of about 1,000 selected information systems/services and databases. Some of the major information networks/centres sponsored by the UN and its agencies are:

- ◆ DARE (Data Retrieval System of Documentation in the Social and Human Sciences) (UNESCO)  
United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Social and Human Sciences, Documentation Centre, 1 rue Miollis, F-75732 Paris Cedex 15, France.
- ◆ INRES (INRES Computerised Inquiry Service) Special Unit for TCDC, United Nations Development Programme, Room 1206, 304 East 45 St., New York 110017, USA.
- ◆ POPIN (Population Information System) Population Division, United Nations, New York, NY-10017, USA.
- ◆ AGRIS (International Information System in Agricultural Sciences and Technology)
- ◆ DEVSIS (Development Science Information System) International Development Research Centre, POB 8500, Ottawa, Ont K1G 3H9, Canada.
- ◆ ERIC (Education Resource Information Centre) US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement

(OERI), ERIC Processing and Reference facility, 1301 Piccard Dr., Suite 300, Rockville, MD20850-4305.

## 2.2 Regional Level

There are a number of information systems at the regional level. For example, some of the information systems in development studies in the Asia-Pacific region are :

- ◆ Asia Pacific Information Network in Social Sciences (APINESS); The regional Adviser for Social and Human Sciences in Asia and the Pacific, Unesco Principal Regional Office, 920, Sukhumvit Road, PO Box 967, Prakanong Post Office, Bangkok 10110, Thailand.
- ◆ Association of Development Research and Training Institutions of Asia and the Pacific (ADIPA).
- ◆ Association of Development Research and Training Institute of Asia and the Pacific, C/o Asian and Pacific Development Centre, Pesiaram Duta, PO Box 12224, 50770, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- ◆ Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP), Dhaka.
- ◆ Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP), Chameli House, 17, Topkhana Road, GPO Box 2883, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- ◆ Regional Network for the Exchange of Information and Experiences in Asia and the Pacific (ASTINFO), Unesco, Bangkok, Thailand.

Out of the databases and information systems mentioned above, it would be relevant to briefly describe here the DEVSIS at International level, and DEVINSA as sub-regional level, as both of these are directly related to development studies. A listing of a few Internet sites on Development studies in Asia and Pacific region is also given.

### 2.2.1 DEVSIS

DEVSIS is a global decentralised and mission-oriented information network. Basically, it was created for meeting the information needs of policy-makers, planners and project administrators in developing nations. This information system was

conceived for providing information about socio-economic developmental activities throughout the world. It covers information generated in other areas but which is relevant for the developmental studies. This include data and information from different sectors. Though the DEVSIS, as a global system could not be implemented, yet a number of regional and sub-regional Development Information systems have emerged during the last three to four decades which are funded by various funding agencies. These are: DEVSIS: Canada, i.e. United Nations Development System; INFOPLAN, i.e. Latin American Planning Information Network; CARISPLAN, i.e. Carabian Information System for Economic and Social Planning; and PADIS, i.e. Pan African Documentation and Information System. In addition, ESCAP and IDNAC, i.e. International Database for Information for Non-Aligned Countries have also been in existence for a long time.

### 2.2.2 DEVINSA

In the South-Asian region, the DEVINSA, i.e. Development Information Network for South Asia, was started in 1986 with financial support from IDRC, Canada. The main objective of this network is to organise a computerised database on socio-economic development in South Asia containing data primarily about non-conventional material like research project reports, doctoral theses, working papers, etc., and share this development information between academia, policy-makers, etc., so as to contribute to the socio-economic development of the region.

DEVINSA is coordinated at the Marga Institute, Sri Lanka, and the other members of this network are Bangladesh, India, Male, Nepal and Pakistan. DEVINSA has been found to be very useful by researchers, policy-makers and organisations engaged in developmental studies. The whole DEVINSA database is available in printed as well as in digital format.

### 2.2.3 Resources on Development Studies: World Wide Web

Some of the major research covering development information on the World Wide Web in the Asian-Pacific region, which can

be accessed through Internet are as listed below:

<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVL/AsianStudies.html>

<http://www.psu.edu/research/anzsc/areas/au/Ausi.html>

#### **On Australia**

<http://ias.leidenuniv.nl/wwwvl/southeast.html>

#### **On Southeast Asia**

<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVLPages/IndonPages/WWWVL.Indonesia.html>

#### **On Indonesia**

<http://www.univie.ac.at/Sinologie/sg.wwwv.html>

#### **On Singapore**

[http://www.monach.edu.au/ttp/pub/bane\\_lao/laoweb/laoVL.htm](http://www.monach.edu.au/ttp/pub/bane_lao/laoweb/laoVL.htm)

#### **On Laos**

<http://www.mtc.com.my/Virtual-Library/Malaysia.html>

#### **On Malaysia**

<http://www.nectec.or.th/WWW-VL-Thailand.html>

#### **On Thailand**

<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVLPages/VietPages/WWWVL-Vietnam.html>

#### **On Vietnam**

<http://www.columbia.edu/cul/libraries/indiv/area/sarai>

#### **On South Asia**

<http://webhead.com/WWWVL/India/>

#### **On India**

<http://www.catmando.com/wwwnp.html>

#### **On Nepal**

<http://www.univie.ac.at/Sinologie/cn-wwwv.html>

#### **On China**

[http://www.macau.net/main/macau\\_vl.html](http://www.macau.net/main/macau_vl.html)

[http://www.bluemarble.net/\\_mitch/monglinks.html](http://www.bluemarble.net/_mitch/monglinks.html)

#### **On Mongolia**

<http://peacock.tnrc.edu.tw/taiwan-wwwv.html>

## **2.3 National Level**

Several countries have either established or are establishing national information systems for providing information support for socio-economic development at national level. Some of these are as listed below:

### **2.3.1 United Kingdom**

DEVLINE established in 1966 in the British Library for Development Studies, has the most comprehensive collection of literature on development studies in Europe and is one of the largest in the world.

A large percentage of this literature consist of non-conventional material. About 2,50,000 monographs and 8000 serial titles are already listed in its current collection and over 25,000 documents are added each year to this collection. Most of the literature included deals with economic and social developments, both rural and urban and specific areas such as health education, communication, industrial development, population and gender studies, environment, human rights, democracy and government, etc.

Since 1994, the Library is providing online information service consisting of database searchable by MINISIS Software. This is a free service launched in 1994, accessible over INTERNET under the name DEVLINE. In the first phase the DEVLINE provides access to four categories of information:

- Bibliographical Information;
- Information on Economic Information Resources;
- Information of Teaching and Training Opportunity;
- Information on UK Academic Institutions working in Developing Countries.

Presently the DEVLINE has one of the richest collection of developmental studies material available worldwide.

### **2.3.2 United States of America**

US Agency for International Development, Centre for Development Information and Evaluation has a huge database on Development Studies worldwide. This whole database is available to developing countries on CD-ROM.

### **2.3.3 India**

In India several social science research institutions/organisations have set up documentation centres which not only support

research activities of the parent organisations but also provide information services to the outside scholars.

About 27 research institutes in social sciences are supported by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), and majority of these are engaged in teaching and research in development studies. In addition to library and information services, a few other major libraries and information centres providing information support in Development studies at national level in the country are:

- National Social Science Documentation Centre (NASSDOC) (ICSSR), New Delhi.
- Planning Commission Library, New Delhi.
- National Documentation Centre on Mass Communication, New Delhi.
- Research, Reference and Training Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi.
- National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi.
- Research Information for Non-Aligned and other Developing countries, New Delhi.
- Social Science Information Centres of SNDT Women's University, Mumbai and MS University of Baroda.
- Centre for Development of Instrumental Technology, New Delhi.

NASSDOC established by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) in the year 1969 is providing comprehensive information support for development studies in India. Information about some of its major information products and services including the indexing and abstracting journals brought out by ICSSR is given in Annexure—A. NASSDOC also have major international databases in social sciences available in digital format mostly in CD-ROM format. A list of such databases is given in Annexure—B.

### **3. DEVELOPMENT STUDIES LITERATURE IN INDIAN LANGUAGES**

Most of the information support for development studies is in English language. For developmental activities at local level,

information provisions would have to be made in local languages used by people, administration and the government officials in a particular state and/or region. Such information services in non-English languages are either made by individuals and private ventures by enthusiastic persons have shown some good results, however, because of lack of support from libraries and users several of these services could not be sustained for long. Even information about the existence of such services is hardly known to the potential users. Actually, the death rate of such new information services in regional languages is as high as their birth rate.

India has about 15 official languages which are being used by academia and state/UT governments in day-to-day administration. Teaching and research work is now increasingly being done in these languages. Enough literature is being produced by governments and other organisations at State/UT level in different Indian regional languages which does contain useful information on Development Studies in the concerned region. However as such literature is widely scattered and available mostly in 'grey' form it is generally out of the reach of users outside the region, where it is being generated. Efforts need to be made by State/UT governments for starting information services in these regional languages.

## **4. DEVELOPMENT STUDIES LITERATURE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

### **4.1 Certain Problems**

One major problem of access to information in development studies is the non-coverage of development literature from developing nations in most of the western databases. There is therefore a need to develop indigenous databases in digital format in these countries. For this purpose, better coordination between national information centres and other libraries in the regions is required. Information services at national level should be planned in such a manner that they are comprehensive, produced in time, moderately priced and available in

various formats like CD-ROM, Online, printed, etc.

One of the major characteristics of information in development studies is that it is not of much use across national or sub-regional languages and across countries. Therefore more emphasis would have to be laid on the creation of information services at national level. Some developing countries like India have already created and developed several information sharing tools and services like union catalogues, directories and handbooks, bibliographical and statistical databases and other secondary services. A few centres are providing efficient document delivery services as well.

It needs to be emphasised here that users interests in development information are usually restricted to local (country, state and region) information only. This is in sharp contrast to the science and technology information, where users cannot afford doing research without searching the global information databases. Nevertheless, even in development studies, there are certain areas which may attract universal interests. For example in the case of Indian development literature the interest may be more from neighbouring countries in the SAARC region, South and South East Asia.

Apart from general theories, methodologies, experiences, etc., these may include literature dealing with case studies, with factual/numeric information such as demographic information, database of experts, expert institutions, research in progress, institutional pattern of administration, macro and micro-economic indicators, and others.

It needs to be mentioned that majority of the information services and databases presently available in the Asian region are produced in hard/printed format. There is a need for converting such databases into digital format such as CD-ROMs, floppies, etc. for which adequate resources in terms of money, manpower and computer hardware and software are required on priority basis.

Unless the data and documentation services are available in digital format, the exchange of information, and data will not be very smooth in the region.

## 4.2 Information Support in Developing Countries

With the advent of PCs in 1980, developing countries have started using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on a scale which, only a few years ago would have seemed somewhat unimaginable. The ICTs are undoubtedly playing a useful role in providing information support in the development in these countries.

Some of the barriers in the use of the ICTs in many developing countries are however because of the existence of inadequate infrastructure such as unreliable and erratic power supply and poor communication system as well as insufficient institutional mechanism and somewhat outdated administrative practices and procedures. Concerted efforts need to be made at national, regional and international levels to remove these barriers. The strengthening of communication infrastructure is needed not only for information support but even for implementing various development programmes; promoting peace; eradication of poverty, illiteracy and ignorance. It may be added that while the use of ICTs is useful in the socio-economic development of a country their adoption in the developing world has several socio-economic and cultural implications, which are being widely debated by social scientists and the respective governments. Each country has therefore to take care of its negative and positive impacts.

The developing countries should not open the information and communication sectors to other nations blindly because that has several services implications. The 'information have' countries can limit the role of 'have-nots' in the world of information economy. As major producers and controllers of information and databases the former can isolate the 'information have-nots' countries by putting barriers in the access to the vital information and data under their control.

New ICTs and global information revolution can in a way widen the gap between the rich and the poor and thereby limit the role of the less prosperous countries in the process of globalisation, world peace and stability.

However, if made easily accessible and properly utilised they can as well provide more equity and increase the pace of development in developing countries. Fortunately, the ICTs can help in bridging the present gap in the present world by linking isolated researchers with their colleagues and peers located in the different parts of the world. The exchange of knowledge through information networks, can help in the process of problem solving and decision making in nation. The ICTs are useful in the socio-economic development of a country and their adoption in the developing world has several socio-economic and cultural implications, which are being widely debated by social scientists and the respective governments. Each country has therefore to take care of its negative and positive impacts. If left unchecked, the globalisation of information will widen the information gap between developed and developing countries. It will further distance elites from the general population and limit the traditional social and economic development efforts.

As mentioned earlier, in development studies, the information generally tends to be cultural specific and has geographically limitations in terms of its utilisation. The information systems created to handle development studies are therefore more likely to be successful at local, national and sub-regional levels than at international level. Active support and encouragement from governments is therefore required for upgrading information and communication systems, networks, products, and ICTs which would enable developing countries to be well informed and active participants in their own development programmes.

#### **4.3 TCDC: Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries**

The level of development in information and documentation resources and services in developing countries varies from country to country and there is a big gap among them as 'information haves' and 'have-nots'. Some of the developing countries are already greatly exploiting information and communication technology in providing information services.

However, in several other countries such infrastructure is almost non-existent. A substantial number of developing countries can therefore contribute effectively by sharing their experiences and resources in this area with other countries which are lagging behind in this area. There is a need of helping each other under TCDC modality. Establishment of relations between various countries at bilateral level for exchange of persons, experiences, etc. under TCDC programme can be very practical and useful in upgrading information services and in improving access to information for developmental efforts world wide.

#### **5. INFORMATION MARKET**

The information market for development studies is quite big, complex and active. The users of development information are scattered in academia, business and industry, government and other sectors. The development information is being used in different areas such as science, technology, agriculture, medicine and engineering. There is a big difference in the nature of demand for information within the above groups and from one group to another. In most of the developing countries quite a realistic information support is available to academia but certain categories such as administrators, policy makers, non-government organisations and grass root level workers still lack effective information support.

There is an imbalance in the infrastructure and information and documentation services in developmental studies. What is available is not known to the users. In the present day world the distribution between information rich and information poor is not necessary dependent on the degree of possession of available information source but on the utilisation of such information. There is therefore an urgent need of creating information locating tools which provide access to information sources like directories, inventories, union catalogues, etc. Unfortunately there is a lack of organised information about these tools.

A better cooperation between the library intermediaries, and users of information can be of great help in this matter. Both are to be

exposed to each others tools and techniques in exploiting and making full use of information.

## 6. CONCLUSION

It is relevant to point out the results of development researchers that have policy implications are not generally properly disseminated among the target group of users such as policy makers, business and industry and others which results in gross under utilisation of these research findings. The style of writing of such reports for the peer group has also to be changed and need to be repackaged in different formats for different users' groups specially for administrators and policy makers.

There is no doubt a big imbalance between the demand and supply of developmental

information not only in India but world wide. The situation can be improved only by sharing resources and networking among libraries and information centres, so that one can really make better use of existing limited resources.

In the end it may be emphasised that development studies, being of interdisciplinary nature require information support involving several disciplines and cannot be just limited to the traditional disciplines like economic development. For making effective information support in this area multiple sources have therefore to be tapped. Only inter- and intra-disciplinary approach can provide effective information support for development studies in a realistic manner.