

## Community Information Services: Nature & Relevance

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### Abstract

This article stresses upon the need of Community Information Centres (CIS) as nodal source of information regarding health, family matter, legal, social, housing, employment, etc. Various steps in designing and establishing a CIS to be followed are also given.

### 1. COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES' NEEDS

My son has just completed high school education, I want to know the availability of different courses for him to pursue further studies and their respective job potential along with the addresses of the educational institutions offering these courses in the neighbourhood. I want to perform the marriage of my daughter. I would like to have authentic information on shopping for the event. I am a retired person, I would like to have information on old age homes, emergency medical care and about voluntary organisations which can utilise my knowledge and expertise. I am an unemployed young man, I need information about self-employment schemes or job opportunities. Where do I get this information? These are only a few examples of the felt information needs of different groups of people in any community. Public is starving of information required to solve problems they face in their daily life and subsistence.

There are some government offices and agencies that give information about agriculture, family planning, employment exchanges, etc. Public libraries also provide some information. Large gaps exist between information required by different sections of population and the availability of such information from a nodal source. The

community information services (CIS) centres developed to fill this gap for information on need act as nodal agencies to provide information to all segments of people in a community.

The needs of a community can be classified into general and specific needs. General information needs are those which are felt by all people in a community. These relate to information regarding ambulance services, nursing homes, medical practitioners, transport facilities, employment services, communication facilities, shopping guides, lawyers etc. These general needs can be broadly grouped into:

- (a) Health: information regarding emergency health services, hospitals, nursing homes, specialist medical practitioners, etc.;
- (b) Family matters: marriage, adoption, maternity rights, will making, etc.;
- (c) Consumer problems: consumer rights, standards, how to complain, etc.;
- (d) Money matters: personal finance, how to obtain loans, how to claim welfare benefits, how to file tax returns, etc.;
- (e) Employment news: employment opportunities, self-employment opportunities, training opportunities, etc.;
- (f) Legal information: citizens' rights and duties, legal aid and information about lawyers; and

- (g) Housing information: finding a house for rent, landlord-tenant relations, repairs, buying and selling, security and related matters.

In addition to these general information needs of all people, there are specific information needs of special groups of people in the community. Often these groups are not articulate. They are disadvantaged and cannot even identify and express their information needs. They are not aware of the agencies that offer welfare services and special programmes to improve their living conditions.

### 1.1 Welfare Programmes

There are a number of welfare programmes provided by central and state governments to alleviate their condition of poverty ignorance and disability.

To understand the nature of welfare measures provided by governments, a brief outline of such programmes provided by the government of Andhra Pradesh (A.P.), is given here as an example. To improve the living conditions of the disadvantaged groups A.P. Government is taking the following steps:

- (a) Acquiring and distributing land for construction of houses on the basis of lists prepared at village level, enlisting names of people who belong to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, backward classes, minorities and poor people who do not have a house and who did not avail the benefit earlier.
- (b) On this basis, categorisation lists are prepared and *pucca* houses are sanctioned.
- (c) On the same basis, a scheme is promoted/implemented by the State Government to allot land for cultivation to the landless poor.
- (d) Similarly, loans are sanctioned to unemployed poor to start self-employment projects.
- (e) For women and children, there are separate benefit schemes.
- (f) There are schemes for protecting and educating girls.
- (g) Social welfare schemes and pension schemes for the old and disabled people are designed and implemented.

- (h) Special loan schemes for weavers, washermen, barbers, fishermen and other similar groups are administered.

- (i) Also development schemes for the promotion of education, social welfare hostels, community halls, etc. are designed and implemented.

Some voluntary organisations and non-government organisations (NGOs) also provide help to the disadvantaged people. The poor and illiterate groups for whom these services are addressed need to be provided/enlightened with information regarding the availability of these schemes and services.

There is no single agency which collects all this information, and repackage it in a suitable form for the use of these sections of the society. The community information service/centre should emerge as the nodal point/agency to provide information services to all people, and cater to both specific and general information requirements of both literate/articulate and illiterate/inarticulate groups of people, in the manner and form that is understood by them.

## 2. PLANNING OF CIS CENTRE

To design, develop and establish a CIS centre that can become the nodal point for all information services, a systematic planning is necessary. Following steps can be considered for planning of such a centre:

- (a) Identification of the information needs of a community, both expressed and potential needs.
- (b) Listing out and consulting the existing agencies or providers of community information like government and non-government agencies for designing an integrated service. One can also consider the possibilities of setting up a CIS with shared premises and resources with a cooperative management committee and local liaison group.
- (c) To gather material for the provision of community information services. The selection of material should be done by people who belong to and know the community best.

- (d) A selection committee may be formed with leaders of various groups of the community. For example, teachers, lawyers, doctors, politicians, heads of government agencies, religious and charitable organisations and NGOs etc.
  - (e) Material should relate to specific local needs that are identified by the agency.
  - (f) Since CIS is oriented towards problem solving, material should be up-to-date, accurate and capable of solving problems of individuals and groups in their day-to-day life and long-term progress.
  - (g) To satisfy general information needs of a community, directories of hospitals, nursing homes, educational institutions, etc. may be compiled.
  - (h) A list of useful emergency contacts like police, ambulance, doctors, and fire service may be maintained along with addresses and phone numbers.
- (i) To provide information to the needs of disadvantaged groups of people in the community, the CIS must enlist itself on the mailing lists for receipt of information brochures of the relevant government agencies, like agriculture extension workers, village development officers, small scale industries departments, public relations and publicity departments and non-government agencies and organisations. The relevant information should be repackaged in a suitable form, language and media so that it is easily understood by both literate and illiterate people.
- Once the service is initiated by CIS, a constant review programme may be undertaken to find out the effectiveness of the service, and changes and modifications may be made if necessary to improve the service.

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