



# The flow of, and access to, information in Bangladesh: A village level case study

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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** This paper identifies the sources and channels of information in the rural areas of Bangladesh and highlights the information flow and access patterns at the village level of Comilla and Chittagong districts in Bangladesh. It proposes some suggestions for effective information services in rural area, as well as a specific model for a Bangladesh Integrated Rural Information System (BD-IRIS) to improve the information system of villagers. This study uses structured interviews through a pilot survey of 20% of the households from each village and information gathered by personal observations and other secondary sources, as well as appropriate statistical methods. A total of 155 responses is included in the study.

Existing conditions of information flow and access in this case study indicate that there are problems in access in spite of interpersonal sources and channels of information. Of course, it is important to remember that the low literacy rate in the villages studied and in many similar communities presents many serious barriers. The author recommends establishing a Village Information Center (VIC) to provide integrated and concerted information services, along with an integrated rural information system for the purpose in the villages studies, and more widely, to meet the requirements of all people in villages in Bangladesh. The case study is one of very few studies focusing on the flow and access of information for rural areas of Bangladesh, particularly as regards information sources and channels, system and services. The approach can be replicated in other communities, and the proposed model for future direction to improve information system of village level people of Bangladesh could be modified for use in other countries.

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## Introduction

Information is an important ingredient in the development process. To improve the quality of life in all of society,

information as a vital resource for overall development is now well established. It is the major resource particularly for policy-makers, planners, decision-makers, scientists, Research & Development organizations, technologists, economists, executives, researchers, professionals, business

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houses and the general population. Informed citizens are in a better position to analyze and find solutions to day-to-day problems and to make sound judgments and effective decisions. Every development process and contemporary human conditions depend greatly on access to information that is precise, relevant, accurate, adequate, expeditious and timely available (Mezbah-ul-Islam, 2007, p. 4). Although efforts have been made through various community development programs, villages in rural areas, by and large have remained backward and people in these communities have been deprived of the benefits of modern socio-economic progresses.

Information today as a resource is capable of transforming and improving the living standards of the individuals and thereby bringing about progress in the society (Longchar, 2009). Though the value and need for information may differ from person to person depending on the situation and the need of the users, as the information needs are strongly influenced and conditioned by the specific circumstances of people and the places in which they live (Beal, 1979). To enhance the value and utility of information requires an understanding of the needs of the information users and provision of information in the appropriate format and level (Gopinath, 1985). Formulation of any national information policy must identify the needs of the country to meet the educational, cultural, economical, political and recreational information needs and aspirations of the citizens (Barua, 1985). It is important to know and understand the users and their diverse needs of information by identifying their background, interest, specialization, etc., in order to enhance the effectiveness of information flow and access (Girja Kumar, 1990).

Proper information flow and access is a necessity in life; it guides every action, moulds every thought, and sustains the many complex interactions that make up any natural system or social organization (Barwise & Seligman, 1997, p. 4). In this context, information, like any other resource, needs to be well managed through proper support and coordination in growth and usage, to avoid the problem of being wasted and inefficiently utilized and have the desired, positive impact on the development processes (Mangla, 1998). Access to appropriate information is the key factor in the sustained development of any society because it reduces uncertainty and enhances awareness of possible courses of action for better solutions (Mchombu, 1995). 'Community Information Needs/Library Services (CIN/LS)' was an attempt toward identifying the problems related to the public library's role in providing information to the rural citizens. Though the project did not result in any definite solution to the problem of how public libraries can cater to the information needs of the rural people in America (Barron & Curran, 1980).

According to several authors (e.g., Bell, 1986; Boon, 1992; Camble, 1994; Sturges & Neill, 1998, pp. 2–4), the lack of information has impacted negatively on the development process. Although academics and researchers are aware of the value of information in development, there is some concern that information is still not considered to be as important as other resources are. Assessment of the provision of information services to rural people, the majority of whom was illiterates, largely neglected by the libraries and other information

agencies are needed. The realization that all members of a society have identifiable information needs and the idea of development embracing involvement and participation of every member of a society, which has made it imperative for literates and non-literates to have access to information, was duly considered in carrying out the Rural Development Information System (RUDIS) Research project (Aboyade, 1984). A number of authors of earlier studies (e.g., Camara, 1990; Neelameghan, 1980) indicated that many planners, developers and governments did not yet acknowledge the role of information as a basic resource, or are unaware of its potential value (Sturges & Neill, 1998). The problem is also approached from the point of view of information users in developing communities. Many people are not always aware of what information entails (Manzvanzvike, 1993; Rosenberg, 1993). Many people contend that information (or knowledge) is power; however, that information by itself is worthless and cannot solve problems. Information has power only when used and applied (Boon, 1992; Martin, 1984; Paez-Urdaneta, 1989) effectively. Of course, it is important to remember that the low literacy rate in the villages studied and in many similar communities presents many serious barriers.

The rural development and policy-makers in Bangladesh had so far left rural libraries out in their plans and programmes. For an all-round national development, due emphasis needs to be given on rural development—which depends not only on the generation of new scientific and technological innovations, but also timely delivery of those information through appropriate media and form to the intended users (Hanif Uddin, 2000). The UNESCO Thesaurus (1995, pp. 508, 736) states that "access to information" is used for "communication barriers" and "information barriers". Similar changes were applied to the bibliography in *Library and Information Science Abstracts* (LISA) in 1995, when the formerly used term "information barriers" was replaced with a more general concept, namely, "access to information". Generally speaking, "access to information" is the ability to find a certain document and use its content (Keenan & Johnston, 2000, pp. 6–7). Today, the notion of information has changed from something to know to something to have as any other resource. Baker (1984) was right in this regard "Until very recently information was output, it was read in newspapers and books. Now it is raw material, as important as coal, steel and petroleum. As such it can generate wealth by enabling resources to be better exploited". It is no wonder that the present age has been rightly called the Information Age. Moreover, information flow analysis has been applied to the determination of the security of information to a given system (Denning, 1976; Denning & Denning, 1997; Potter & Conchon, 2000, pp. 46–57; Smith, 2001).

## Information in rural development

Rural development, even in this age of globalization, has acquired a central role in international development discourse (Behera, 2006). A society can only be considered developed when its members are well equipped with information pertaining to all spheres of life. The multi-dimensional role and value of information in modern

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