

READ Nepal: Two Decades of Community Empowerment

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■ By Rozina Nepal

Rural Education and Development (READ) Nepal celebrated its 20th Anniversary on November 2, marking the occasion with activities like documentary screening, cultural shows and paper presentations. During the event, the organisation also made public its plan to establish its 50th Community Library and Research Centre (CLRC) at Panauti, Kavre. "We are raising local funds to open our 50th Centre. We've already raised Rs 1.98 million for the purpose and plan to inaugurate the Panauti Centre on July 2, next year," said Sanjana Shrestha, Country Director of the organisation.



Sanjana Shrestha
Country Director
READ Nepal

Sanjana Shrestha was appointed the Country Director of READ Nepal in 2009. Prior to this, she served as a programme officer at the organisation for five years (2004-2009). Shrestha was also engaged with different women empowerment projects of Canadian Cooperation Office-Nepal. She has been working as development worker for the past 12 years.

READ Nepal is one of the very few INGOs to have originated in Nepal. It was founded on November 2, 1991 by Dr Antonia Neubauer 'Toni', an education researcher from New York. Inspired by a Nepali trekking guide's wish to have a library in his

village, Toni established the first community library in the Junbesi village of Solukhumbu district the same year with some 900 books. Since then, the organisation has been working with Nepali communities to bring changes in society through establishment of libraries. "READ Nepal has already established 49 CLRCs in 38 districts," informed Shrestha.

Today, READ is working in three countries – India, Bhutan and Nepal. It works under sustainable rural development model. READ brings together education, enterprise and community development to induce social change in rural communities. According to Shrestha, apart from building the libraries, projects for the sustainable livelihood are also started in the communities. This serves twin purposes: The communities become economically independent gradually and the CLRCs sustain over the long run. "Each library has made positive educational, social and economic impacts on its community," she added.

In 2006, READ Nepal won the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Access to Learning Award. "The award included a purse of USD 1 million. We also received replication grant of USD 3 million which helped us to further expand READ's sustainable rural development model in India and Bhutan," said Shrestha.

READ started working in India in 2008, focusing its efforts in Rajasthan, Haryana, Manipur and West Bengal. READ India has opened five CLRCs. READ Bhutan was also initiated in December 2008 but it opened its first CLRC only in May 2010. READ Bhutan has established three CLRCs so far. Today, READ has 57 CLRCs and more than 90 for-profit enterprises globally. About five million people have access to READ Centres. On an average, each such centre has 4,500 books.

Education

With the establishment of a READ centre, a whole community gets access to educational resources. Through its partnership with local organisations and communities, READ Nepal provides training in literacy, health issues, computer and livelihood skills. "We have organised programmes on early childhood development, women's empowerment and livelihood skills. Every day, people visit the READ centres to improve their reading skills. This is empowering both individuals and communities," said Shrestha. Some centres also help students to engage in education-related extracurricular activities. The

organisation mainly focuses on quality education.

Community Development

READ Nepal provides information to the communities about the READ model, level of participation required and long-term goals of the READ Centre. After the community is educated, a Library Management Committee (LMC) is formed which presents a proposal for the establishment of a new centre. Then, READ and the community work together to meet this goal.

Enterprise

Working with the rural communities to establish small for-profit enterprises that help generate income to sustain the centre over the long run is the READ function model. The communities are involved in micro-entrepreneurship. Women are engaged specially in savings and credit business. "More than 150 women's groups have access to credit now," said Shrestha. READ business development managers collaborate with LMCs to explore market opportunities in each community. Some of the successful

businesses include furniture factories, ambulance services, tractor rental services, community radio stations and gooseberry processing facilities producing iron-rich food and juices.

The organisation believes in establishing a true partnership with the organisations and communities it works with. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Indian Embassy, German Embassy, UNESCO Nepal, Town Development Fund, World Education, Room to Read, Ministry of Education, National Library, Nepal Library Association, Practical Action, Asia Foundation, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), Equal Access International etc are some of the key partners of READ Nepal. "As each CLRC is registered as an NGO, we do not work with any other NGOs in particular," said Shrestha. Each community contributes about 10-15 per cent of the total cost for the establishment of a READ Centre in addition to READ's investment.



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