Research Article

Poverty Alleviation: Repositioning Public Libraries in West Bengal in Achieving Sustainable Development Goal

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A B S T R A C T

682 million people, as estimated by the World Bank in 2022, around the world were living in extreme poverty. These people have been living a life of hopelessness and endless struggle to arrange meals for both ends. The SDG 2030 Agenda has recognised that "eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty" is the greatest challenge for the global leaders, and it is indispensable for sustainable development. Both the developed and developing countries have adopted different initiatives in line with the 2030 Global Goals to achieve a world free from poverty, hunger and economic inequality. Almost every administrative and service unit of the government has become a part of this effort. But the role of public libraries is somewhat undermined. Though, public libraries are better positioned than many other government organisations. It may play a vital role in empowering men and women to combat poverty. This article explores the avenues that public libraries in West Bengal may create for their users in the society and lift them from poverty and provide a better living condition. But public libraries have some hurdles to remove before they create these avenues for the people. These hurdles have also been explored in this article.

Keywords: Public Libraries, West Bengal, Sustainable Development Goal, Poverty, Hunger

Introduction

Millennium Development Goals (MDG) during the years 2000-2015 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) for the period 2015-2030 are the two most discussed and important global agreements for development planning for forpoverty alleviation, eradication of hunger, illiteracy, diseases, gender equality, quality education, clean water and sanitation, economic growth, clean energy, combating climate change, life on land and underwater, industry, innovation and infrastructure.[1] The United Nations, after the completion of the Millennium Summit and Millennium Declaration in the year 2000, set forth a set of eight goals for all the 191 member countries. The timeline for achieving these goals was 2015. Though substantial advancement was made in many areas, most of the goals were far away from being fully achieved. Many member countries faced challenges in meeting the targets set, particularly in the areas of health, education and gender equality. Some countries marked significant achievement while some countries made little or no progress. Though the progress was not a uniform one, a global collaboration to achieve the

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objectives started. The UN wanted to continue the global collaboration to the next level to create a better world, and a revised framework was introduced in the form of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 to address the unfinished agenda of MDGs.[1]

SDG 2030 has a new set of 17 goals. SDG 1 aims to eradicate "poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty".[2] It commits to leaving no one behind and also to reaching out to those who have been left farthest behind. To keep track of the progress in the eradication of extreme poverty, reduction of poverty by half and formation of a sound policy framework at the regional, national and global levels prioritising the needs of the poor and taking gender equality into account, it has set 13 indicators and seven targets. Its objectives are to guarantee equal rights to economic resources, basic services, inheritance, ownership, control over land and other property, natural resources, new technologies, and financial services, including microfinance, for everyone by 2030 with a focus on the impoverished, vulnerable and destitute.[2, 3, 4, 5, 4,5,6]

We have crossed the midpoint of the targeted time period for implementing the 2030 agenda. But the stark reality is that we are still well behind most of the goals as reported in the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 published by the United Nations. It has been reported that only 15% of goals are on track, 48% are moderately or severely off track, and 37% are in stagnation or regression. The following figure 1 from the SDG report 2023 presents that SDG1 has made fair progress, but acceleration is needed to achieve the target in the next seven years. But for the redoubled acceleration, this trend of progress will leave 575 million people living in extreme poverty by 2030.[7]
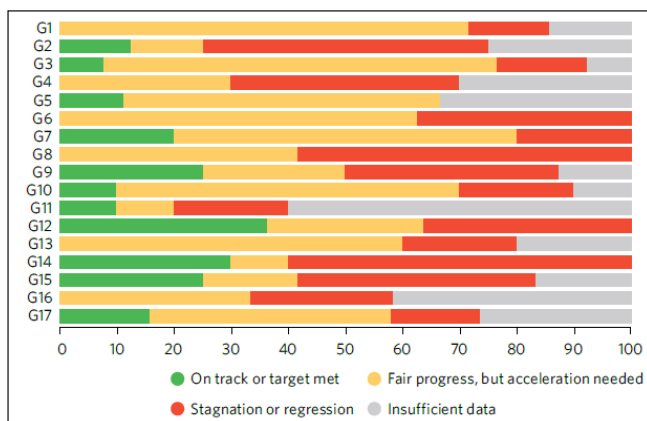

Figure 1.SDG Progress at the Midpoint
(Source:https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/img/
progress-midpoint-1.png)

Both the developed and developing countries have adopted different initiatives in line with the 2030 Global Goals to achieve a world free from poverty, hunger and economic inequality. Almost every administrative and service unit of the government has become a part of this effort. But the role of public libraries is somewhat undermined. Though, public libraries are better positioned than many other government organisations. It may play a vital role in empowering men and women to combat poverty. Public libraries in West Bengal may create a number of avenues for earning a livelihood for their users and lift them from poverty and provide a better living condition. But public libraries in the state have some hurdles to remove before they successfully create these avenues for the people.

Literature review

The United Nations has recognised public libraries as one of the important agents contributing to the implementation of SDGs. Cross-cutting issues like access to information are key to the achievement of SDGs. Worldwide, there are approximately more than 410,042 public libraries which ensure access to information for all; provide ICT infrastructure; and promote media and information literacy and digital literacy skills.[8]

Islam, MA et al. (2022), in an exploratory study, examined how public libraries in Bangladesh work towards the achievement of SDGs. Librarians of 59 public libraries participated in the study. The researchers found that public libraries in Bangladesh are contributing to the achievement of SDG 1 by providing access to information and resources important to make informed decisions and make life better.[9]

Marc R.H. Kosciejew (2020) argued that public libraries play a central role in realising SDGs by reducing poverty by providing access to information and resources that can help people improve their economic situation. According to the researcher, public libraries can serve as spaces for community dialogue and participation, which may result in economic and social development.[10]

Michael-Onuoha, HC et al. (2020) discussed the importance of libraries in achieving the UN SDGs, especially in eradicating poverty in Nigeria. The researchers highlighted the need for sustainable development and the role of libraries and library and information professionals. They recommended adequate funding, public-private partnerships and promotion of ICT education to achieve the SDGs.[11]

Zaid, YA and Egberongbe, HS (2020) reviewed relevant literature on the use of public libraries and their role in poverty alleviation. They explored the impact of public libraries on poverty alleviation among the youths in Lagos State, Nigeria. 80.7% of youths living in Lagos State were in need of information on survival and income generation to cope with poverty. They found that out of eleven libraries, only three libraries provided free access to information and communication technologies. They recommended free access to information and community space and investing in programmes and services that promote social inclusion and poverty alleviation.[12]

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Biswas, S. and Mahato, A. (2020) studied the role of public libraries in economic development in West Bengal. They suggested refocusing on the role of public libraries as information centres and how they can promote entrepreneurship among the youth.[13]

Abata-Ebire, B.D. et al. (2018) mapped out the role of libraries in achieving sustainable development goals in Nigeria. They also explored the challenges that the libraries had been struggling with. Inadequacy of funds, staff, facilities and poor infrastructure were found to be the most challenging factors for the libraries in Nigeria.[14]

Strand, K.J. (2018) explored the impact of public libraries on poverty eradication and women's empowerment in Namibia. According to him, public libraries may play the role of a development agent and catalyst for women's empowerment if there is adequate knowledge of the women to access the right information. He advocated recognising the value of public libraries and more investment in inthem.[15]

Mbabaali, M. (2017) studied the role of libraries in Uganda in fighting poverty. According to him, in poverty alleviation programmes like Operation Wealth Creation and Youth Livelihood Programme, libraries could play a crucial role by disseminating information regarding those programmes and making them aware of how those programmes could affect their lives. He recommended a "community-library-based information system". He also recommended the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge resources in community information practices; cooperation libraries; government agencies; and NGOs.[16]

Abubakar, BM (2013) presented the strategic roles of public libraries in Nigeria in poverty alleviation in the 21st century. Emphasis was given to the importance of public libraries in informing and supporting poverty alleviation programmes like the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP). Innovative and strategic approaches were given to bring out the potential of public libraries to contribute to poverty alleviation.[17]

Available literature on this issue mostly emphasised the access to information and resources for the users. Access to information is undoubtedly extremely necessary for users. However, mere access to information does not attract the users to visit the public library on a regular basis because they need earnings for their livelihood. There is no such study available that clearly gives direction to employment generation for their users. The current study particularly focuses on this direction.

Methodology

20 public libraries were selected from Hooghly district and Birbhum district of West Bengal. The sample for this study includes 9 librarians and 200 library users. Data was collected from users with the help of a structured questionnaire containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions, and data from the librarians was collected through unstructured interviews. Analysis of data was done using percentage and frequency distribution.

Analysis and Findings

Section I: Findings related to library users

Age wise distribution of library users

Figure 2 shows that out of 200 users, young people between 18 and 30 years visit the library the most, followed by teenagers and middle-aged people. Children aged between 5 and 8 years are the least in number.

Occupation of Library Users

Fig. 3 presents that participant library users in this study are from different occupations. Most of the users (58%) are students of different age groups. It is very important that 17% of users are housewives and 9% are farmers. Among the other users, 6% are civil servants, 5% are retired persons, 3% are teachers and 2% are shopkeepers. So, the diversity of the user groups is typical for public libraries.

Purpose of Library Visit

In the above figure 4, the highest number, 117 (58.5%), of users visit the library to borrow storybooks. 82 (41%) users seek books on their syllabus, while 73 (36.5%) users go to the library for job search, and 71 (35.5%) read magazines in the library. Competitive books are used by 66 (33%) users. Only 47 (23.5%) users read newspapers.

Users' Satisfaction of Library Services

Fig. 5 presents the scenario of users' satisfaction with library service. 37.5% of users were found to be not satisfied with the library services; 25.5% were satisfied to a little extent; 21% were only partially satisfied; 8.5% were satisfied and only 7.5% were fully satisfied with the service of the library they used to visit.

Frequency of library visit

Fig. 6 shows that 45.5% of users visit the library only when any necessity arises. A very negligible (4.5%) percentage of users come to the library on a daily basis, while 11% of users visit the library weekly. 15.5% of users are visiting libraries twice in a week, and 23.5% of users are visiting once in a month.
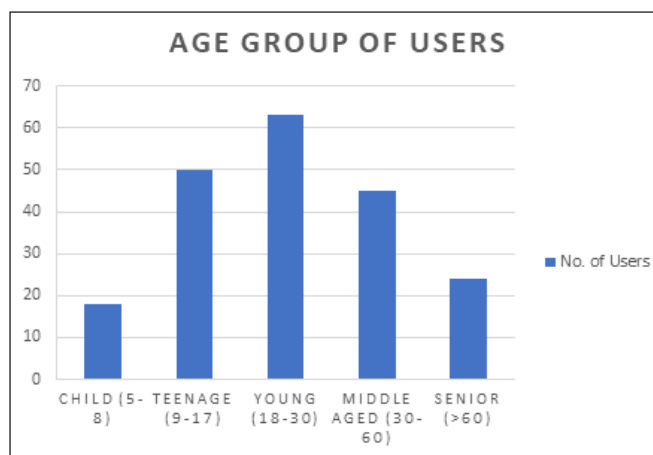
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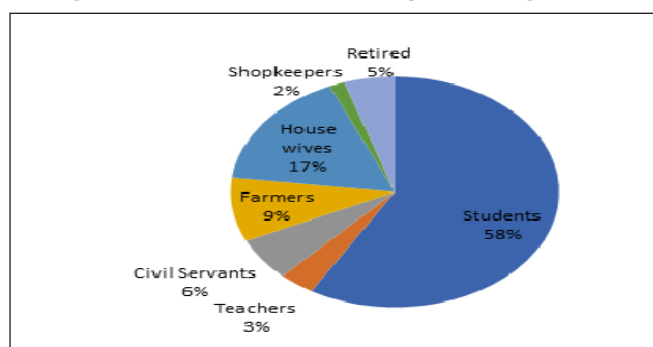**Figure 2.Distribution of Library Users Age Wise**

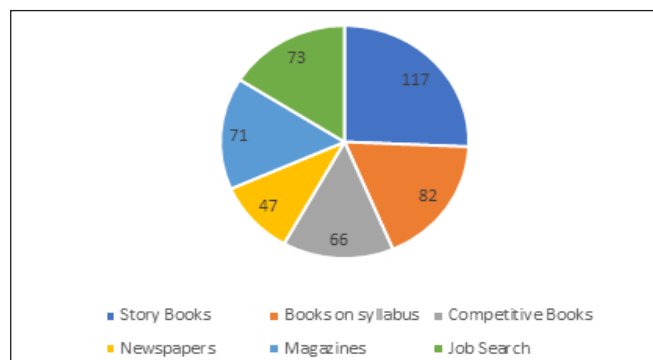**Figure 3.Occupation wise distribution of library users**

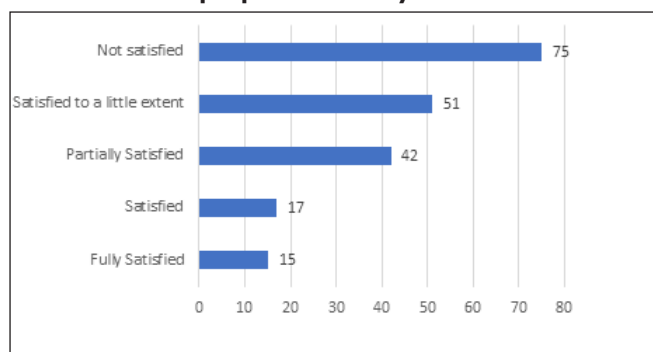**Figure 4.Distribution of Library Users as per their purpose of library visit**

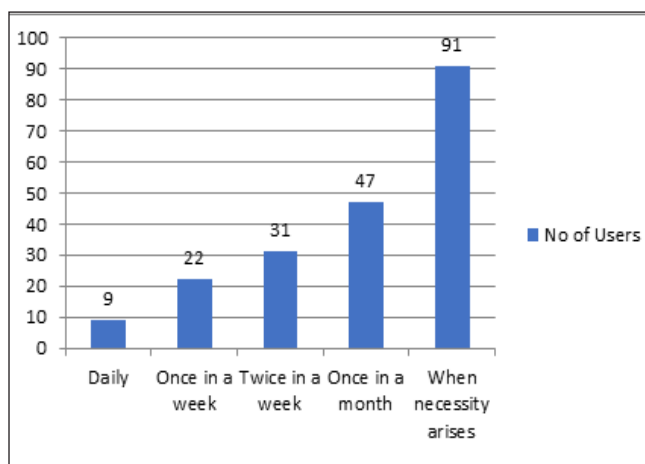**Figure 5.Distribution of users according to their satisfaction in library service**

Figure 6.Frequency of library visit

Section II: Findings relating to Problems in

Effective library services

In this section issues relating to public library infrastructure which adversely affect the library services have been discussed. Data relating to this were gathered from the unstructured interview of 9 librarians of the Birbhum and Hooghly districts of West Bengal.

Lack of adequate staff

West Bengal has a well-developed and strong public library network. The Left Front government of West Bengal spearheaded the library movement in the state. Currently there are 5224 libraries in the state, and out of these 5224 libraries, there are 2209 government-sponsored libraries, which include rural, primary unit, and area libraries. But, of late, as far as the library staff is concerned, it has been in a sorry state. A public library in West Bengal has five sanctioned staff, including the librarian, library assistant, junior library attendant, durwan cum night watchman, and daftory cum bookbinder (figure 7).
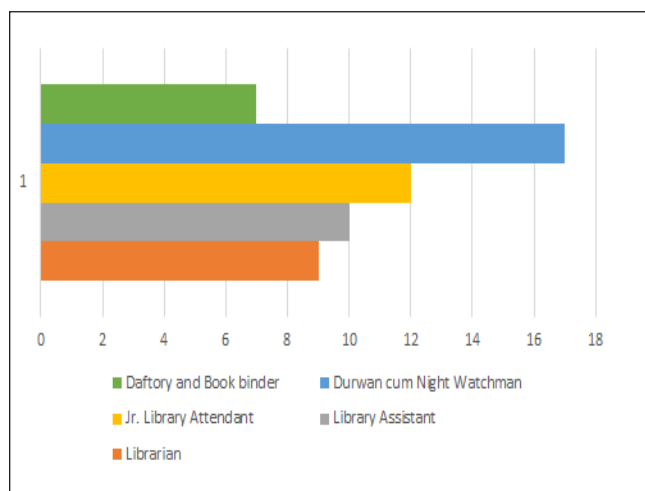

Figure 7.Staff Strength

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But, in the case of this study, the 20 libraries which have been surveyed have only 9 librarians. It means 45% of the library has no librarian. Similarly, only 50% of libraries have library assistants. These two most important positions in public libraries have been lying vacant for a long time. This scenario establishes the fact reported by Neha Banka (2023) in Indian Express that almost 50% of public libraries in West Bengal are fully or partially closed.[18]

Lack of Innovative Library service and inadequate fund.

Public libraries in West Bengal generally have all the traditional services, like circulation of books, reading rooms, reference service, and newspapers. In most of the cases libraries fail to have designed locality-specific innovative services for the people. All the 20 public libraries surveyed have been providing these traditional services to their users. But not a single library is facilitating an internet browsing facility for its clients, though this facility is available for the staff. No library is providing or is in a position to provide ICT training, career counselling, or entrepreneurial skill development training to the users due to inadequate staff and funds. Public libraries in West Bengal receive funds from the government for books and periodicals, furniture and equipment, and book binding and preservation. The librarian may apply to the Directorate of Library Services for funds for library building construction or for the repairing of an existing library building. But there is no provision for any fund from the government to impart ICT skills, soft skills, entrepreneurial skills, etc., for the users.

Analysis

From the discussion above we find that 58% of users are students, and they are between 17 and 30 years old. During this period of life, they are generally in search of jobs. They try to acquire skills to make themselves job ready. But in rural areas there is little scope for them to acquire such skills because of the unavailability of quality training centres and poor economic conditions. The library may take this opportunity to provide them such training free of cost and attract them to the library to make them regular visitors in the library. But poor infrastructure of the library makes it difficult for the librarians to think of arranging such training programmes. It has been found that 45% of libraries have no librarian. 9 librarians interviewed are alternatively once or twice a week attending the other libraries where there is no librarian. Other essential posts are also lying vacant year after year. The government doesn't provide any funds other than the allocated regular funds. In such a situation it is impossible to implement other programmes beyond the traditional ones.

Recommendations

Recruitment of Library Staff

West Bengal has a well-developed and strong library network. All that is needed is that all the vacant positions are to be filled up on a priority basis because without proper manpower, nothing positive can be achieved.

Revise Qualification of Library Staff

The existing staff pattern and the qualification of the librarian may be revised. The qualification of the librarian should be revised to at least graduation in any subject with a library science diploma or degree and a certificate in computer application or honours graduation with library science. Library assistants should have at least passed the secondary examination and have a certificate in computer applications.

Provide Adequate Fund

The government should allocate more funds so that the librarians may arrange necessary training programmes for the users. The government should expand the areas of fund allocation and give the librarian ultimate power to utilise the fund to arrange programmes which directly uplift the economic condition of the user community.

Arrange Training Programmes

In rural areas young people, especially the girls, have little scope to acquire job-ready skills because of the lack of quality training centres. They generally have to travel ten to fifteen kilometres for such training. It involves huge costs. So, libraries may take this as an opportunity for them and help people uplift their economic condition. The following programmes may be arranged by the public libraries in their areas concerned.

Soft Skill Training

Libraries may arrange soft skill training for girls and boys who cannot afford such training. It will help them get jobs, and in turn, libraries will also be flooded with the footfalls of users.

Entrepreneurship Training

Public libraries may play the key role in promoting and nurturing indentureship in the community. Small business training like soap and detergent making, mushroom cultivation, paper plate making, etc., may be imparted free or at nominal cost. These training centres are generally located in towns and cities. So, rural people find it difficult to get such training opportunities. If public libraries arrange such training, people will be highly benefitted. Libraries may also arrange a meeting with the appropriate authority after the training to help the participant get a business loan.

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ICT Training

In the present-day world, ICT skills have become essential for every field of work. If ICT skill training is provided by rural libraries, people of economically weaker sections will reap the benefit the most. It will help them get placed in better jobs or start ICT skill-based businesses.

Training on Share Market

According to Pathy, M. (2017), the majority of the rural people in Cuttack, Odisha, have limited knowledge of investments in the stock market.[19] For them, saving money in banks or post offices is everything. They are almost unaware of financial markets in India. If proper training by the public library is provided to the educated rural youths and they are properly guided, an avenue for earning will open for them.

Conclusion

In addition to the regular information services, many poverty alleviation programmes may be arranged by the public libraries to help people fight poverty. In this way public libraries in West Bengal may revive the lost glory and reposition the entire public library system in the society. The West Bengal government has taken a number of initiatives for poverty alleviation. But to reap the benefit of these schemes, people have to clear many administrative formalities. If libraries are given the responsibilities to implement skill development training programmes, there will be two-fold benefits – first, the public library system will revive its past glory, and positive attitudes to public libraries will develop among the people.

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