

LIKE A FROG IN A WELL

The story of a librarian at the Lumbini Eye Institute in Nepal

Sudha Risal Sharma, 2009

Sudha Risal Sharma is a Librarian at the Lumbini Eye Institute in Nepal. Located outside the major city centres, She rarely has the opportunity to attend training workshops which, for the most part, are held in larger city centres, such as Kathmandu. This case study examines her experience following an invitation to a training workshop and the impact it has upon both her and her institution as well as the opportunities resulting from it.

I still remember the moment I got an invitation from Mr. Krishna Mani Bandari, Tribhuvan University Central Library, to attend the INASP/ PERI Train the Trainers September 2006 workshop. You might have thought that getting such an invitation is not a big deal - anybody can get it. But at that time getting a workshop invitation was quite new to me.

Like in other developing nations, workshops and conferences are being conducted, but mostly in big cities. Participants from big cities get opportunities to refresh their skills in such workshops and seminars. Unfortunately, due to limited numbers, no quota is given for participants from libraries outside these cities. Seldom do people from the smaller or more remote locations get an opportunity to participate.

Other limitations also apply which prevent national inclusion by organizers of training events. Frequent strikes often lead to road closures, which makes transport more and more challenging and expensive in Nepal. Can you imagine closing down all transport, everything, for 17 days and still working in such environment? We are facing this scenario. Regular travel by air is not always possible and is costly. As professionals are concentrated in the capital we are left with very few professional librarians working outside of the capital. We cannot blame anyone, or anything, specifically because there are many factors occurring side by side and preventing research outside of the central areas.



Lumbini Eye Institute staff

This problem applies not only to the information technology field, but in all sectors. Now I think you know why I was happy with the workshop invitation. This PERI invitation and travel grant to Kathmandu from Bhairahawa was new for me, as was the INASP organization, and I was

very excited. Using my searching skills to assist library users was not important because my users don't rely on me for this service. I was like a caretaker of books at the Lumbini Eye Institute Library. Library users did not believe or expect that librarians could search for the information they wanted. It's as though we are in a well and we think that the world is this well, we do not care what is outside this world. I was like a frog in a well. We are in such a place where there is nobody to ask or to point out our mistakes. That makes us like a frog in a well.



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Getting back to my first INASP workshop in 2006... I was eagerly waiting to listen and learn from the knowledge of the quiet and calm personality who stood in front of us. During that time I had exposure to CDS/ISIS (Computerized Documentation Service / Integrated Set of Information Systems) only. Internet access was there in our library but only as dial-up and not broadband. Before then I used to download articles from either Google or HINARI. In a whole day I could only download one or two with my limited knowledge of computer searches and the constraint of dial-up connectivity. The workshop taught me how to search properly and reach information required quickly. The term IP address and broadband connectivity was new to me. I also learned a lot about INASP's work and PERI, while strengthening my searching skills.

After the workshop, I returned back to my small well again. However, I was not the same frog of the same well by that time. I understood the difference in collecting and disseminating information properly. Before, I could not even send an email with my inferior grasp of the English language. Can you imagine - an information professional not able to send an email?

Then, again, there was an unexpected event in my professional development. Two organizations working on

preventable blindness - Seva and LAICO (Lions Aravind Institute of Community Ophthalmology), organized a workshop "i-connect 2007" in Mudurai, India. This was aimed at networking and the sharing of knowledge and information among the librarians of its partners institutions. There I met AVSL (Association of Vision Science Librarians) members, learned and shared my work. With the help of AVSL and my networking, my library was able to better provide information to its users.

In the meantime, a researcher, Dr. Ken Basset, from Seva Canada came to know about our interactive, informal networking. He suggested I go further and try to build a network with the librarians of Nepal. I realized that would be a very fruitful opportunity for us. Before then, I had not thought about the benefits for researchers of vision science in Nepal. I was only thinking of my users, their needs and the institution's development.

To build this network, it was necessary to gather vision science librarians for this purpose. I applied for a small grant through INASP. It was my first proposal, and I was successful. Thus, with the help of INASP and Seva, eighteen librarians gathered in February 2008 at the Lumbini Eye Institute for a workshop entitled "i-connect 2008". This was a national workshop on vision science resource centre collaboration and AVSL members also joined the meeting.

With the hearty co-operation of our institutional staff and with this small grant we succeeded in doing a lot for informal networking. Only after this I thought, "Oh my goodness, a group of librarians in similar subjects can help in national research". Now, four of us, all national librarians, are in regular contact and helping each other - sometimes with references and writing skills, sometimes by exchanging materials and sometimes keeping up-to-date.

To help expand our network I am presenting a paper at the International Congress on Medical Librarianship entitled "Creating Research Capacity in Developing



Lumbini Eye Institute staff members



Participants of 'i-connect 2008 National Workshop on Vision Science Resource Centre Collaboration'

Countries: The role of international collaboration and mentoring networks of informational professionals - a case study from ophthalmic resource centres in Asia and Africa". I have also joined the AuthorAID mentoring scheme to help with my writing skills.

Finally, I would like to mention that now at present, I am not a librarian who does not know how to email a friend and who spends a whole day searching for one article. Times have changed and now I feel like an experienced librarian of a developed country because I have the strength of an AVSL (Association of Vision Science librarians) network and strong searching skills. INASP-PERI and Seva, I thank you.

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Sudha is now enrolled as research scholar at
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Topic: Published, Unpublished and Grey Vision
Science Literature of Nepal: A bibliometrics study.

Relevant websites:

AVSL
www.avsl.org

Seva
www.seva.org

For more information on INASP and PERI:
www.inasp.info

INASP events in Nepal
www.inasp.info/nepal-events

Small grants
www.inasp.info/small-grants
smallgrants@inasp.info