Chapter 10
Strategizing the Role of Local Actors to Enhance Outreach

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ABSTRACT

The reach of open universities in any society can be gauged by how well their practitioners are able to sense the information needs of their prospective clientele and put in place responsive information and guidance systems. The Open Universities in developing countries face a challenging situation to create such information services because their prospective clientele are too vulnerable, live mostly in geographically inaccessible areas and are nearly cut off from traditional systems of information dissemination. It’s due to this reason that the Indian open universities have long been trying to explore innovative ways of community sensitization. India offers a challenging situation primarily due to its diverse socioeconomic and cultural settings. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), having jurisdiction over the entire country, has to face this heterogeneity while planning out its programmes and policies. During three decades of its existence, IGNOU has been using variety of strategies to sensitize the people, enroll them and provide support services right at their doorsteps. However despite the overwhelming response from urban areas, the participation of disadvantaged communities living in deep rural interiors is still a major cause of concern in the university. This chapter critically reviews the issues involved in community sensitization and seeks to evolve a roadmap to reach communities, cut off from the mainstream. The need for information and guidance services has been described in detail. The author’s engagements with socioeconomically disadvantaged communities of Madhya Pradesh (India) have been described. The analysis presented here helps to evolve new paradigms for involvement of local actors and gives the recommendations for successful implementation of outreach programmes. Lessons learnt out of such experimentations will be crucially important to implement India’s ambitious University’s Outreach Programme called “Unnat Bharat Abhiyaan”.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite their sincere efforts, the developing countries have not been able to adequately gear up their educational systems to meet their Human Resource requirements. The dropout rates are high and there is huge mismatch between the output of educational systems and requirements of job market. It is estimated that 20 percent of young people in these countries fail to complete primary schooling (UNESCO Media Services, 2012) and don’t possess employable skills. The resulting knowledge gap puts them in to serious disadvantage in a competitive global knowledge economy (World Bank, 2003). One of the major reasons is the poor information services in villages where major proportion of target population lives (Watts and Fretwell, 2004).

In this context, there is an immediate need to sensitize the disadvantaged communities, capacitate them without any clash with their existing livelihoods pursuits and afford them more diversified options for livelihoods. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has placed a renewed emphasis on these issues. The following statement by Irini Bokova categorically underscores the importance of education in today’s world (UNESCO, 2015).

Education is a right that transforms lives when it is accessible to all, relevant and underpinned by core shared values. Because quality education is the most influential force for alleviating poverty, improving health and livelihoods, increasing prosperity and shaping more inclusive, sustainable and peaceful societies, it is in everyone’s interest to ensure that it is at the centre of the post-2015 development agenda.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems have gained prominence primarily due to their potential to connect to disadvantaged communities belonging to culturally diverse backgrounds (Renae Azziz, 2009 and Smith & Ayers, 2006), strengthen their livelihoods (COL Web Site) and thereby address the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, it has been a big challenge for ODL institutions to reach out to such communities and sensitize them (UNDP, 2011). Success of ODL systems will ultimately depend upon, how well they are able to respond to socio cultural constraints of disadvantaged communities, build up rapport with them and device suitable support services.

Though ODL systems have been able to generate a sizeable enrolment, most of this enrolment comes from urban based communities which are advantageously placed to access information (Pandey, 2012). The rural areas which inhabit more than 75% of the population still face problems in taking the benefit of ODL systems. The prevalent modes of providing information through newspapers/TV/Radio/internet etc are not accessible to the vast majority of such disadvantaged communities. Face to Face information services are preferred choice for rural poor, but such services are almost nonexistent in deep rural interiors. The disadvantaged communities need support systems to take decisions, to help them test the reliability of information and workout livelihoods solutions for themselves. They not only need information about the career options available to them but also to know the risks attached to each option. It cannot be done just through a one way flow of information through traditional means.

This chapter underscores the need to bring about the involvement of representative organizations of community, narrates the learning experiences from some experimentation and recommends that Community Based Organisations should be capacitated and suitably financially incentivised to involve them in process of information dissemination.

The open and distance learning systems have developed a culture of marketing their programmes through aggressive marketing techniques like commercial advertisements, hoardings, pamphlets, aware-
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