

# Motives to start a library

*In the first Newsletter of 1993, we published an article by Frédéric Prat, on his experience in setting up a small library on ecological agriculture. The reactions to this article were overwhelming. Almost 100 readers asked for more information. It appears that the need for written information is immense. However, collecting books is one thing, managing information is something else. In this article, Eva Philipps draws attention to some pitfalls and gives us some aspects to be considered before setting up a documentation centre.*

## Eva Philipps

There is hardly an organisation in the world that does not produce and need documents of some kind. Even the smallest Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in remote rural areas relies on written information in its daily work. At the same time, it also produces documents itself, such as project proposals, reports, photographs and extension material. These documents must be collected, recorded, analysed and stored, as they constitute and mirror the know-how and experience of the organisation and its staff. This information is also likely to be of interest to other organisations who might want to know about the experience in order not to duplicate efforts. Documentation units should serve as a bridge between various organisations within countries and regions.

### **Pooling resources or not?**

The need for documentation centres in rural areas is beyond questioning, if it were only because there are so few of them, but that does not automatically mean that each organisation actually needs to set up its own documentation unit or library. It may be a much better idea to rely, completely or partially, on better equipped, better stocked libraries of neighbouring NGOs. Also, various organisations can make agreements with each other on different collections to establish. In this way, the limited resources available may be used in a much better way. Besides, increased exchanges form a good starting point for networking activities.

What are the main reasons for organisations to establish libraries of their own?

- To document the internal know-how and experience of the organisation, not only for internal but also for external use;
- To collect books and documents on the specific subject(s) in order to improve the implementation of projects and activities;
- To gain and demonstrate power. An organisation which has easy access to information is more efficient and effective and, thus, more powerful than its competitors and clients;
- To be independent and self-sufficient. An organisation with easy access to

information is not dependent on the information policy of other organisations;

- To create a status symbol: if an organisation has its own library it is usually regarded as an efficient organisation with more prestige.

However, I do not want to warn NGOs against setting up libraries of their own, but I want to make it clear that it is most important to be aware of one's own motives. To set up a library is quite expensive and it is even more expensive to maintain a library, especially in terms of personnel. It would be a waste of time and effort to start a library without being able to maintain the services because of bad planning or lack of funds, as this would inevitably lead to losing the trust and the patronage of the users. The best way to avoid such mistakes is to carefully analyse the motives for setting up a documentation unit, and also the existing needs.

### **Who are the users?**

A lot of questions have to be asked to find out what the library should look like. Are you aiming the service at internal or external users? Do similar information services already exist in this region? Is it possible to co-operate with other organisations and to exchange information? Do not forget to include your own organisation in the list of the interviewees: why, what for and how often did your own organisation make use of the documentation services offered by other GOs and NGOs in your region and field of activity? If not, why didn't you make use of it?

Is there a habit in your country rather not to ask others for help in order not to lose face? Are persons who ask questions and thus admit gaps in knowledge regarded as inferior? When setting up an inquiry service for people from outside the organisation, one should keep in mind that addressing inquiries to information centres is regarded by some people as admitting their ignorance. We should not underestimate such a fear of losing face when defining the need for information.

### **Which information is needed?**

What kind of documents would the users expect to find in your library? If an organisation is dealing mostly with farmers, the

type of books will differ considerably from the ones needed for extension workers or for students. Thus, the content and size of the collection of a documentation centre should suit the needs of its users. An important problem is how to choose the right information at the right time for the right person in the right form.

Regardless of its size, any documentation unit should be able to provide the user with any type of information about the studied field. This goes well beyond the kind of documents one traditionally finds in libraries, such as books, reports, articles, journals. Information about other resource centres and organisations in the same field is also needed, as well as information about resource persons in your country or region or active in your field of study.

### **Who will do the work?**

Before you start a documentation unit, you must decide on the staff. Should a trained documentalist or librarian be employed as a full-time worker or should a staff member be assigned to do the job on a part-time basis? In the first case, lack of knowledge about the organisation's activities may be an obstacle. In the latter case, knowledge of the field to be documented is available, but specific documentation knowledge is not. Training in documentation should therefore be part of starting up a documentation unit.

### **Who is going to pay?**

Careful budgeting is important, making a clear distinction between the various types of costs on the one hand (installation, operation, acquisition) and on the other hand sources of income by selling services. Budgets for new books or periodicals are often very limited nowadays, but much can be obtained either for free or on an exchange basis. Also, it can be worthwhile to contact potential donors for possible financing of the documentation activity. Some sources of income may help to alleviate the financial situation: charging for photocopying, document delivery services, literature searches, bibliographies on request, supplying addresses and other resources.

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