

Achieving Self-Sustaining Development in Rural Communities: A Case Study of the READ Model in Nepal

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Research Brief

Rural Communities Can Drive Their Own Development

Marginalized and remote communities can take steps to lift themselves out of poverty; provide access to education and skills; and more effectively engage women, youth and other marginalized groups according to a new study conducted by IREX, an international education and global development non-profit. Through a deliberate and sustained process of community engagement, we observed that community members can increase their ability to solve collective challenges – a capability that, much like a muscle, grows stronger over time when exercised. The practice of working together allows communities to provide tangible services like job- and livelihood-related training, healthcare, and micro-finance as well as specialized programming for women and children. It also allows them to generate and leverage the resources they need to sustain these services – and a spirit of community ownership – indefinitely and with limited or no dependence on external financing.

¹ This research brief is a summary of a longer, more in-depth study.

Overview: How Can Rural Communities Lift Themselves Out of Poverty?

This brief presents the findings from a case study conducted in 2017 of the Rural Education and Development (READ) model for sustained rural community development. READ was founded on the principle that communities truly want to be committed to their own development. If there is demand and ownership from the community, development efforts are more likely to be successful and sustained.

READ's model focuses on sustainable, community-owned and managed Community Library and Resource Centers (READ Centers) as the launching point for rural social and economic transformation. The Centers are designed as safe spaces to serve whole communities, featuring a place with books and educational materials, training/conference hall, information and communications technology (ICT) room, and women's and children's sections. Through a variety of partnerships, READ Centers offer customized trainings and comprehensive programs for thousands of individuals each year in the areas of livelihood skills, micro-enterprise development, literacy, women's empowerment, youth empowerment, health education, and technology. Using a whole community-driven approach (as opposed to approaches driven by specific organizations or individuals within a community), these Centers are transforming the lives of all community members, particularly women and girls and other marginalized groups that are all too easily left behind.

An external evaluation commissioned by READ Global documented significant outcomes for both individuals and communities in villages where READ Centers had been established.² These outcomes include:

●	Increased access, use, and exchange of information and resources;
●	Increased economic opportunities;
●	Educational advancement;
●	Increased autonomy, confidence, and opportunities for women; and
●	Increased income for all Center users as a result of livelihood trainings.

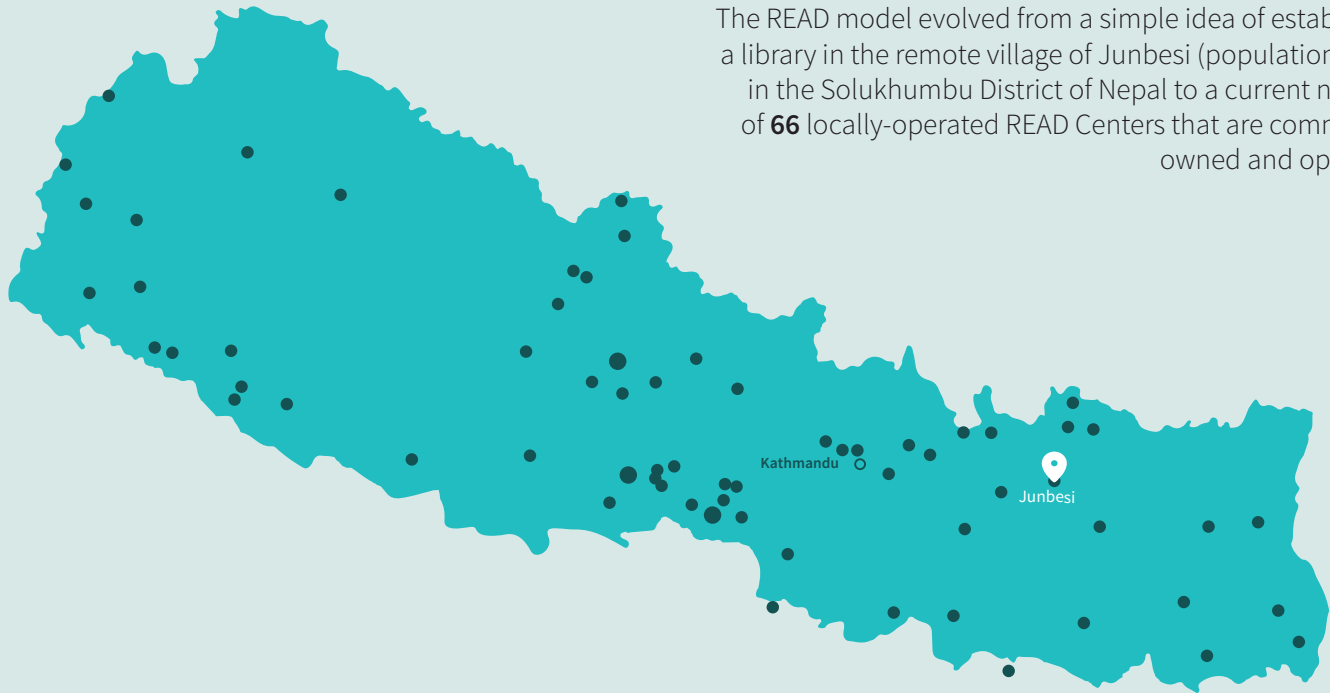
In addition, the evaluation confirmed that all READ Centers established since 1991 were still in operation.

As a result of the community engagement and co-investment, READ Centers become hubs of community outreach, information and resource access, women's groups, livelihood training, savings co-ops, computer literacy training, and health and agriculture programs – outcomes driven by the communities themselves. When entering a new community, the development of each READ Center is facilitated by the READ Nepal country team through a deliberate three-phase process, which requires participation and co-investment by the community at each phase in order to move to the next. Following start-up, the READ country team monitors the READ Centers' operations, outreach and engagement of all community members, and services and programs delivered at the Centers, offering assistance as needed, but does not have oversight or another formal role in Center operations.

Despite the gains that the READ Centers in Nepal have made, there has been a lack of empirical evidence on what makes these Centers successful and what the critical elements of the READ approach are. The case study summarized here addresses these gaps.

2 Learning for Action (2014). READ Global 2013 Evaluation Report.

The READ model evolved from a simple idea of establishing a library in the remote village of Junbesi (population 1,575) in the Solukhumbu District of Nepal to a current network of **66** locally-operated READ Centers that are community-owned and operated.



Research Questions and Design

The case study of the READ model in Nepal answers the following questions:

- **How do the READ country staff facilitate the development of a READ Center?**
- **How are READ Centers managed and operated, and how are services delivered?**
- **How are community development outcomes (such as education, greater prosperity, and women's empowerment) created and how are READ Centers sustained?**

To answer these questions, IREX researchers conducted field visits to six READ Centers as well as 53 stakeholder interviews during April 2017.³

³ IREX researchers visited the following READ Centers: Panauti (Kamre), Jana Jagaran (Nuwakot), Thokarpa (Sindhupalchowk), Jhuwani (Chitwan), Agyuali (Nawalparasi), and Deurali (Nawalparasi).

Findings

READ Centers Deliver Four Core Benefits:



Sense of Community



Shared Commitment



Ability to Solve Problems



Access to Resources

This analysis was informed by scholarly research showing that community development depends on strengthening the capacity of communities to work together to meet common challenges.⁴ We found evidence of four specific types of enhanced community capacity in villages where READ Centers are located. We also observed that these capacities were generated through the three-phase process used by the READ country team to facilitate the development of READ Centers and through the management and service delivery strategy once the Centers were operational.



⁴ Chaskin, R. J. (Ed.). (2001). Building community capacity. Transaction Publishers. Chaskin, R. (1999). Defining Community Capacity: A Framework and Implications from a Comprehensive Community Initiative. University of Chicago: The Chapin Hall Center for Children. Goodman, R. M., Speers, M. A., McLeroy, K., Fawcett, S., Kegler, M., Parker, E., ... & Wallerstein, N. (1998). Identifying and defining the dimensions of community capacity to provide a basis for measurement. *Health education & Behavior*, 25(3), 258-278. Chavis, D.M. & Wandersman, A. (1990). Sense of community in the urban environment: A catalyst for participation and community development. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 18(1), 55-81.

Four Types of Community Capacity



Sense of community

The degree of connectedness among community members and a recognition of shared circumstances and experiences.⁵

Sense of community. The individuals interviewed described increased connections, trust, and teamwork among community members as a result of the process of building and operating the READ Center. In some cases, groups that used to be divided because of class, caste, or politics before the Center was built reported increased connectedness and sense of community through working together to establish a new READ Center. Community members described gaining a sense of ownership, belonging, and trust in the READ Center itself along with a shared vision of the Center as a resource for future generations. Centers were described as “safe spaces” where “everyone feels welcome” and “the separate sections [women, youth, computing] are not isolated but connected so that everyone is exposed to everyone else.”



Shared commitment

Willingness among community members to help each other and volunteer/contribute to the greater good.⁶

Shared commitment. The case study results show a willingness among community members to invest concretely in a common goal. This includes participation in income-generating enterprises needed to support READ Centers, involvement in co-designing the READ Center building, contributing a small amount of money and even the bricks toward building the Center, volunteering in Center operations and community outreach roles, and numerous other community engagement activities. Once operational, READ Centers institutionalize the commitment by community members that was initially developed through the process of mobilizing the community to work together to build a Center.



Ability to solve problems

Mechanisms for problem-solving through which the community's commitment can be translated into action.⁷

Ability to solve problems. READ Nepal staff familiarize community members with prioritization and decision-making at an early stage to help them ensure the Center is open to all members of the community. Once the residents decide to work together to build a Center, they form a subcommittee to select and manage income-generating enterprises that will fund the construction and ongoing costs of the Center. This and other subcommittees related to each of the Center's programs and activities, along with the Center Management Committee, are formed to make decisions, identify priorities, and solve problems. Both community members and READ staff described the problem solving and decision-making capacity of the Centers' various committees as critical to reinforcing the community's trust in the Center as well as its ability to create and adapt programming to address the evolving needs of the local population over time.

5 McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of community psychology*, 14(1), 6-23

6 Chaskin, R. (1999).

7 Chavis, D. M., & Wandersman, A. (1990); Chaskin, R. (1999)



Access to resources

Access to economic, human, physical, and political resources within and beyond the community.⁸

Access to external resources. Community members reported that READ Centers have been able to access resources in the broader community, such as other local organizations, government agencies, experts, and funders in support of services at the READ Center. READ Centers were described as a “bridge” between the local community and district government offices, which has resulted in ongoing mutually beneficial collaboration as well as financial resources for some Centers. A particularly striking example of this ongoing collaborative capacity occurred in the aftermath of the devastating 2015 earthquake. READ Centers in affected villages immediately became hubs for disaster relief and recovery where residents registered for government benefits, non-governmental organizations (e.g., UNICEF) provided funds and services, rebuilding efforts were coordinated, and local schools temporarily held classes. This combined benefit of collaboration and access to resources within and beyond the local area was documented for NGOs, local hospitals, schools, other READ Centers, local Village Development Committees, government services, political groups, and national networks such as the human rights network and the library network.

Gains in Prosperity, Education, and Empowerment of Women and Youth

Together with the results of the external evaluation referenced above and ongoing evaluation data collected by READ, the evidence from the case study suggested that the READ model’s focus on building community capacity has played a critical role in the success of READ Centers in achieving numerous community development outcomes. As the core strategies of the READ model for building a Center and making it operational were implemented, communities developed a stronger sense of community, shared commitment, ability to solve problems, and access to external resources. These capacities then supported gains in the community development areas targeted by the Centers. These outcomes have included:

- Increased economic opportunities, including income and livelihood skills; and
- Gains in educational attainment, including higher literacy rates and culture of reading.⁹
- Increased access to and exchange of knowledge, information, and resources;
- Increased women’s empowerment;
- Gains in youth leadership;

Several specific strategies of the READ model are responsible for achieving these outcomes:

- 1 the practice of the READ country staff in facilitating and mentoring the development of each Center;
- 2 opportunities to develop community organizing and problem-solving capacity that are intentionally created during the planning, construction, and startup phases of establishing a READ Center; and
- 3 the way the READ Centers’ structure and processes are designed to operate the Center and deliver services related to education, health, livelihoods, and citizenship.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Learning for Action (2014). READ Global 2013 Evaluation Report.

Once communities strengthen their ability to collectively problem-solve, we observed numerous instances of how they innovated to meet newly identified needs. For instance, READ country staff mentored one of the Centers to help them broaden inclusion from all groups in the community. This problem-solving process led them to start children’s activities, which the community had identified as a cross-cutting need. The women who brought their children to participate in these new activities developed a sense of community, which led them to ask for women’s programs on issues such as health, literacy, and livelihood skills development – an area of programming that proved both extremely popular and effective in terms of advancing community development. **This practice has since spread: Now women’s programs are built into all READ Centers, which has resulted organically in an enhanced role for women as decision makers and leaders in the READ Centers, their own families, and their broader communities, without inducing backlash.** Women who participated in leadership programming then began serving on the Centers’ operating committees, agreeing to share responsibility for the success of READ Center programs. As members of those committees, women became part of the problem solving and decision-making process involved in operating programs, doing community needs outreach, and adapting programs to meet those needs, enabling women to have greater voice and decision-making authority in their households and communities.

This cascading effect of the READ model’s core strategies of building community capacity, and community capacity supporting community development outcomes is also illustrated by the story of the Panauti READ Center. **This Center’s Center Management Committee is led by young people who helped design and lead a joint READ Nepal and Panauti READ Center fundraising initiative called the Nepalis Can Campaign, which not only raised close to \$90,000 but also solidified community ownership of the READ Center and its goals.** Under the READ model, members of the Center Management Committee have the role of reaching out to every household in the community to raise awareness of the opportunities provided by the READ Center and to collect donations for its operations, a process that creates a shared commitment across each community to the success of the READ Center. As a result of their leadership and the overall success of the campaign, youth in the community received recognition and gained experience as community leaders.



Benefits of READ Centers Increase Over Time

Although there are no metrics on or data illustrating the capacity of communities to organize and address common challenges prior to the development of READ Centers, interview data did illustrate the central role of READ Centers in building and/or strengthening these capacities. For example, READ country staff described their approach throughout all three phases of working with residents to build a Center in terms of continually broadening the number of people and groups engaged in the process and facilitating community members' decision-making, shared vision, and sense of ownership. Descriptions of operational structures and procedures illustrated that community capacity continues to be strengthened after Centers are established through the way Centers are managed and programs are designed and operated. **Because the process of establishing a READ Center builds in practices for facilitating inclusive engagement, shared commitment, problem solving, and identifying external resources into the operating structure of each Center, READ Centers become engines of community capacity building.** Interviews with READ Center participants, volunteers, and staff revealed that social ties and shared commitment to improving the wellbeing of the community are increased through participation in programs and committees. Based on the case study findings, we hypothesize that the ability to solve problems and access resources beyond the community are also strengthened over time as community members gain experience in managing the Centers, conducting outreach, and delivering programs with the mentoring and support of READ country staff.

Learning and Scaling

When communities learn collective problem-solving practices, we see evidence that these practices contribute to long-term sustainability of READ Centers and the services they provide; growing public participation over time; increased resilience to disasters and crises; and development gains in education, health, and economic well-being. Additional research is needed, however, to address questions such as how the “engine” of community capacity supports specific outcomes (e.g. women’s empowerment, improved household income, etc.); what can be learned from adaptations of the READ model in other countries such as India and Bhutan; and how differences in the development of community capacity translate into different types or levels of community development outcomes.

If the READ model is to be successfully scaled up and introduced to new countries and cultural settings, READ’s existing theory of change should be updated to describe the critical role that community capacity appears to play in generating intermediate and long-term outcomes in specific areas such as education, economic opportunity, women’s empowerment, and positive youth participation in their communities. More importantly, as the READ model is adapted to new contexts, it will be important to capture the lessons of this adaptation. These adaptations would benefit from fully articulating and translating the practices used by READ country staff during each phase of facilitating the development of a Center into a training and mentoring process. This should include the practice of intentionally creating opportunities to develop community capacity during each phase: planning, construction, and operational startup. Finally, the design of the structures and processes used to operate the Center and deliver services is also an important factor in generating community capacity. Attention to the articulation and preservation of these core strategies of the READ model is likely to be important to successful propagation across varied social, political, and cultural contexts. Based on our assessment of the READ model in Nepal, we believe that further research and investment is warranted to understand and then extend the benefits of this low-cost and scalable approach within Nepal and other countries around the world.

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