

# Empowering Rural Public Library Users Towards Sustainable Community Development Goals

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**Abstract:** The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of international targets that were developed in 2015 by the United Nations. These goals aim to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity among human kind for all by the year 2030. They are divided into 17 goals and 169 targets that cover all aspects of life – including education, health care, housing, food, energy and climate, peace and justice, governance and sustainable economic growth. Plus, to ensure peace and prosperity. Empowerment is very important element for a community to become developed and to sustain the development. To be able to have self-empowerment, one must first have a sense of self-help and self-determination. Self-help and self-determination are related to the idea that helping one's self will create collaboration and improve one's quality of life (Christenson, 1989). Power in community development refers to the ability to influence change rather than the power to exploit or dominate others, it is an action of choice. This paper introduces Rural Community Learning Network (RCLN) Traits Model which offers a helpful insight for rural communities to value and support rural public library as community sustainable development center. This model was develop using qualitative approach through interviews with the rural public libraries' staffs, users and non-users, observations, and examinations of documents. Thematic analysis has been used to identify the empowerment sustainability characters for the traits model. This study concluded that rural public libraries in Malaysia had not fully implemented the empowerment elements which is identified as an important element in rural libraries and community development.

**Keywords:** Rural public libraries, Sustainable development, Community empowerment, Rural community development

## 1. Introduction

Sustainability development seems to be identified as an important area to be highlighted by governments, universities, business leaders and non-governmental organizations (NGO) (Annan-diab & Molinari, 2017). There are seventeen (17) elements of sustainable development goals (see in Figure 1), developed by United Nations set in 2000 which has been adapted by 193 countries all over the world.



Figure 1: The Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015)

The seventeen (17) development goals as can be seen in the figure above are; 1) ending poverty in any forms anywhere in the world, 2) ending hunger, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture, 3) ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being regardless of ages, 4) ensuring quality education to all especially children

at rural areas, 5) promoting gender equality and empower women and girls, 6) ensuring access to clean water and sanitation, 7) ensuring affordable and clean energy to all, 8) promoting the decent work and economic development, 9) building robust infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrial development and foster invention, 10) reducing inequalities (among mental impairments or psychosocial disabilities) within and among countries, 11) promoting inclusive, safe, resistant and sustainable cities and human inhabitants, 12) ensuring sustainable depletion and manufacture designs, 13) promoting quick responds towards combating climate change and its impacts, 14) preserving, conserving and sustainably using the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable consumption, 15) protecting, restoring and promoting sustainable use of native ecosystems, periodically managing forests, avoiding desertification, and halting and reducing land deprivation and stop biodiversity loss, 16) ensuring peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, and 17) empowering the means of employment and invigorating the global partnership for sustainable development. Hence, sustainability can be defined as the capacity to bear with certain situation, so that it will be maintained and is long lasting. There are more than 200 definitions of sustainable development can be found (Parkin, Sommer, & Uren, 2003). However, the concept of sustainability is promoting the well-being of current community without neglecting the future is the best definition of sustainability.

Nonetheless, empowering rural public library users towards sustainable community development is important to ensure that these essential public service institutions can play an effective role in facilitating community development and social cohesion in rural areas of developing countries (Public Libraries Association, 2015). These rural communities are often faced with numerous socio-economic challenges including inadequate infrastructure, lack of employment opportunities, inadequate access to basic services such as health care and education, limited access to technology, and other socio-economic disadvantages. Hence, rural public libraries provide multiple source of information, activities and programs that offers healthy and balanced lifestyle. The renewable energy in rural public libraries available in green library practice, reduce the consumption of energy and waste as well as supporting the ecosystem. Providing good jobs and economic growth closely related with the no poverty point which rural public libraries will help in local economic activities. The environmental sustainability is also about responsible consumption of the resources used for the rural libraries.

The library in general should have sustainability element incorporated into their organization's procedures, ensure the library can sustain its existence and service (Karioja, 2009), and not just to preserving the information for the patrons. Nowadays, change is essential to the world we live in whether in social, economic or environment. Community should put effort to follow international recommendations of specific field, so that sustainability issue is not just a simple ideology. Libraries should not be an exception to this effort (Dias, 2017). This study proved that library is more than just preserving the information, eventually as time goes by, library needs the sustainability elements to remain relevant in the community.

## **2. Malaysia Rural Public Library Sustainability Plan**

In Malaysia, sustainability plan was included in 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th Malaysia plan. It started in 7th Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) (Yiing, Yaacob, & Hussein, 2013). The 8th Malaysia Plan (2001-2005) highlighted the sustainable development of energy resources and renewable, while the 9th Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) stressed on environment, economic and social aspects. In addition, improving the standard and sustainability of better life quality through public transport, electricity, water and healthcare were included in 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015).

There are four (4) common goals to ensure the sustainability of libraries based on Cottrill, et.al. in 2015; 1) ensuring that libraries have sufficient financial resources, 2) ensuring that community realize the importance of libraries and prioritize libraries more in budgetary as well as in political agenda, 3) developing policies to extend coverage of wireless network so that library have access, and 4) established policies that control library administration, facilities, services and staffing.

On the other hand, there are few challenges that will obstruct the library's sustainability which are insufficient funding for library services and library staff, losing of job among the library staff, lack of leadership among librarians, and outdated computer and poor Internet connection in libraries.

Library sustainability refers to the placement of a library's core values and resources such as staff time, facilities, collections, services and technology to endure the challenges in order to bring new and energetic life in all aspects of library operation and outreach (New York Library Association, 2017). Currently many Malaysian public libraries (including rural public libraries) ensure their sustainability by cooperating and engaging with non-

government organization (NGO), local industries and local higher learning institution. Building partnerships with other organization or agency at local, regional, national and international and also with the government organizations, non-government agencies, cultural organizations, etc. would help the rural libraries to achieve long-term sustainability and also introduces empowerment elements to local rural community.

A workshop on the contributions of Malaysia libraries to Sustainability Development Goals (SDG) 2030 Agenda was organized by National Library of Malaysia as part of supported the SDG Agenda. There are 41 librarians all over the country participated in this workshop held at Kuala Lumpur with the cooperation of Petronas Resource Centre. An International Federation Library Associations (IFLA) representative was invited to talk about IFLA and IFLA's contributions toward SDG Agenda 2030. The importance of Malaysian and Malaysian libraries as well as librarians to contribute toward SDG Agenda were highlighted. This study is the part of the contribution of the SDG agenda in the aspect of rural libraries specifically, as for currently there is no SDG stories from Malaysia (Akmal Ahmat, 2020).

In the context of Malaysia, rural libraries need to be sustained in the community due to its role of providing information to the rural community, fulfil lifelong learning efforts, social and cultural role among the community (Omar et al., 2014). Many related studies conducted by multiple researchers ( Roziya et al., 2011; Omar et al., 2014; Shaifuddin, Ahmad, & Mokhtar, 2011), have proven that rural libraries have great potential to continuously enhance the knowledge of rural community. For rural community, sustainability is bigger than just environmental issues and support, in fact it is about empowerment – economically, socially and personally. A sustainable rural public library must also work toward empowering economic prosperity and social righteousness for the library staff, their users and the local rural community (Abu, 2012). Hence towards sustainability development of rural libraries in Malaysia, Malaysian rural public libraries have consistently sought to enhance their rural public library services, programs, and activities to satisfy the information needs of the local rural population and promote self-empowerment.

### **3. Research Methodology**

A qualitative approach using structured interviews and group observation was used to investigate the local community engagement practices in Malaysian rural public libraries managed by Malaysia National Library and rural public libraries in the state of Victoria, Australia. In total three (3) prominent and engaging rural public library in the State of Victoria Australia and nine (9) rural public library in Malaysia from variety of different states were selected. The focus was to understand and compare rural libraries' empowerment programs and practices that lead to sustainability. In doing so, a multiple case study approach and cross case analysis method were used.

The respondents use to collect data, were rural public library's staff members, users, and non-users. Each of them was interviewed. Depending on their feedback, the interview session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The data was analyzed using ATLAS.ti version 7. Hundreds of codes were generated as a result of data analysis, which led to thematic classification. Hundreds of coding were generated as a result of data analysis, which led to thematic analysis of this study. The Rural Community Learning Network (RCLN) Traits Model was constructed by taking into account all respondents' responses, group observation discussions, and data analysis results.

Meanwhile group observation was used to provide rich and nuanced data about rural public library users' social interactions and behavior. This method complements interviews data, plus it provides a more comprehensive understanding of a research topic. Group observation is a common research method used in various fields such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, and management. It involves observing a group of people in a natural or controlled setting and recording their behavior, interactions, and communication patterns. Within this study a total of nine (9) group observation was done and the finding supports the results of the study objectives and question.

### **4. Results: The Rural Community Learning Network (Rcln) Traits Model**

A traits model is a method for the prediction of human behavior. RCLN traits model provides a basis type of learning network behavioral approach using and based on local resources, material and knowledge, for instance, using local industries through partnership programs, local associations through affiliation activities, and government and non-government organizations through collaboration events and campaigns.

The Rural Community Learning Network (RCLN) Traits Model (Figure 2) provides useful insight for rural communities to value and support the rural public library as a community empowerment development center. The strategy identifies and emphasizes the significance of improving the four aspects of rural community

development for rural communities. Furthermore, the study helps to raise community members' awareness of the following community empowerment development components: 1) participation, 2) self-help and determination, 3) decision-making, and 4) leadership.



Figure 2: The Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015)

When developing services, activities, and programs for their communities, Malaysian rural public libraries incorporate elements of community empowerment development principles. Community development elements should be combined and fused so that local community members can strengthen their local, individual, and group self-empowerment. The model identifies and emphasizes the importance of improving rural community development characteristics for rural communities. Furthermore, the research contributes to raising community members' awareness of the following aspects of community development: 1) participation, 2) self-help and determination, 3) decision making, and 4) leadership. The RCLN Traits Model will be useful for current and future research in the development of rural community learning networks, which will involve major changes. The following are the elements:

- Participation: promote rural public libraries as a personal and community sustainable development hub for empowering, learning, growing, and gaining information (both formally and informally); and as a community connection and communication location.
- Self-help and Determination: Create rural public library partnership programs with local companies and associations to deliver library services, programs, and activities that will increase community members' empowerment.
- Making a Decision: It is recommended that rural public library services, programs, and activities be developed to foster a strong sense of involvement and awareness among community members. Allowing the local community to make decisions and make choices will assist them in solving problems and achieving their future goals, so rural public libraries will remain relevant to local community development.
- Leadership: It is advised that rural public libraries offer interactive, hands-on programs and activities, such as workshops on communication, management, and delegation skills, as well as impartial educational and scholastic services, programs, and activities. These engagement strategies will strengthen the local community's sense of leadership and empowerment.

The Rural Community Learning Network (RCLN) is created to provide rural communities with the opportunity to share and learn from each other. One unique aspect of the RLCN is that it allows members to helping individuals to find and learn from other community-minded individuals in their area. Through the use of the RLCN approach rural public library can help each member of local rural community to easily engage with their local community by participating in different discussion platform and sharing information and resources with one another. Individuals can also join various interest groups and create their profiles to connect with other like-minded individuals in their community. Malaysia's rural public libraries incorporate elements of community

development ideas into their services, events, and programs for their communities. Community development elements were integrated and fused to allow local residents to increase their local, individual, and group self-empowerment. Improve Malaysia's rural public libraries' programs, services, and activities by leveraging information and technology to strengthen the RCLN Traits Model.

#### **4.1 RCLN Supporting Rural Community Consultation Effort**

The Rural Community Learning Network (RCLN) works as rural community consultation as they are related in supporting community engagement and participation in rural areas.

The Rural Community Learning Network (RCLN) is a platform for sharing knowledge and resources among rural communities. It provides a way for individuals and organizations in rural areas to connect, share best practices, and learn from each other. The RCLN focuses on capacity building, skills development, and knowledge transfer, and seeks to improve the economic, social, and environmental well-being of rural communities.

On the other hand, Rural Community Consultation is a process of seeking input from rural communities on issues that affect them. It involves engaging with community members to gather their perspectives, needs, and ideas, and using this feedback to inform decision-making. Rural Community Consultation can take many forms, including public meetings, surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

Therefore, the RCLN can be seen as a tool for facilitating rural community consultation by providing a platform for sharing information and fostering dialogue between community members and stakeholders. The RCLN can also help to identify areas where consultation is needed and provide guidance on how to effectively engage with rural communities. Overall, the RCLN and rural community consultation are complementary approaches that can support the development of sustainable and resilient rural communities.

## **5. Conclusion**

Public libraries have long been regarded as a pillar of democracy. The rural public library is no different. In fact, rural public libraries are more important than ever in empowering local communities. Furthermore, in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of promoting inclusive and sustainable societies, rural public libraries must do more than just provide physical access to library resources and services in rural and remote areas; they must also ensure equitable digital access and digital literacy for all citizens, as well as provide training to rural public library staff members in information management, technology, and leadership skills. Most importantly, rural public libraries must strengthen partnerships among local libraries, local governments, and community groups in order to develop services that meet community needs and promote empowerment for long-term rural development.

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