

Managing Resource Centers for NGOs: A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK



By NOEMI D. BAYONETA-LEIS, RL and MARIJANE BUGARIN-MABATO, RL



HEALTH ACTION INFORMATION NETWORK (HAIN)



THE FORD FOUNDATION

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Writers NOEMI D. BAYONETA-LEIS, RL and MARIJANE BUGARIN-MABATO, RL

Editors MERCEDES APILADO, MA. ASSUMPTA BABARAN-ROZAL, and BEATRIZ TIONGCO-CRUDE

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Health Action Information Network (HAIN)

26 Sampaguita Ave., Mapayapa Village II

Brgy. Holy Spirit, Capitol District 1127

Quezon City, Philippines

Tel: (632) 952 6409/6312

Fax: (632) 952 6409

hain@info.com.ph

www.hain.org

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Introduction

Non-government organization (NGO) resource centers perform a unique role within the organization and community that they serve. Resource centers primarily support the information needs of the organization, health workers, and the community. They also help fill the information gap because of their specialized collection in terms of subject coverage, format and collection of “gray” literatures or unpublished materials. More importantly, they promote learning and correct use of information in development work and day-to-day living.

It is quite interesting to note that in developing countries, there is an increasing recognition of the resource center as an important component of the organization. Many NGOs in developing countries have a rich collection of information materials that are not usually found in university libraries or popular bookshops. NGOs accumulate a number of materials over the years, usually used in trainings, research, and advocacy. These materials include research studies from different organizations, reports, and other unpublished documents. In some cases, they publish their own materials. However, most of these materials are utilized by a limited number of readers, researchers and network members.

As the collection grows, these materials pile up in the resource center. In many cases, resource centers tend to serve only as repositories of these materials, failing to maximize their utility. Organizing these materials is usually given low priority because the person in charge of the resource center often acts as the secretary, receptionist, or messenger. The centers may have some kind of arrangement (e.g. by subject or by type of materials), but retrieval or location of the materials is often difficult.

Background

Health Action Information Network (HAIN) is a non-government organization based in the Philippines that maintains a resource center with a wide collection of information materials. It also provides a wide range of information services. HAIN serves the research, information and education needs of Philippine and international organizations working on health and health-related development issues. HAIN believes that health is a development issue with economic, political and cultural dimensions. It believes that health comes with empowering people and communities with access to objective and accurate information on health care, so they can make informed decisions, and to allow them to organize their rights. With the help of its vast information network, HAIN seeks to provide information at the local level, where it is needed most. HAIN's core programs—resource centers, publications, training and education, and research—are complementary and coordinated, enabling HAIN to respond to the needs of partner organizations as well as to individuals and groups seeking technical assistance.

In recent years, many NGOs have requested for assistance on how to organize a resource center. While many have been able to adapt some ideas, they still find it difficult to maintain a resource center. Realizing that many NGOs need technical assistance, HAIN organized several consultations with the resource center staff from different local and international NGOs, the academe, and local government units (LGUs). Instead of prescribing fixed solutions to the problems in organizing a resource center, HAIN facilitated discussions on identifying problems, needs, and gaps to help the groups assess their skills and strategies based on the objectives of their organization. Some of the common problems include:

- Lack of funding
- Lack of skills and human resources
- Lack of recognition that a resource center is a vital part of the organization
- Difficulty in obtaining “good” materials

Through action planning and further discussions, participants were able to identify possible alternative solutions that would respond to the needs, like resource sharing and networking activities. It was also discussed how to source free or low-cost information materials.

As a follow-up activity, HAIN conducted training sessions for the participants. The training provided them with basic skills and knowledge on how to manage and organize a resource center. Basic skills included simple cataloging and indexing techniques for easy retrieval of materials. Emphasis was given as well to the use of IT (information technology) as applied to resource center work to store and disseminate information.

Many participants have found the training useful. As a result, HAIN realized the need to produce a resource center manual to provide a quick reference tool for the resource center staff.

Purpose of the Manual

This resource center manual is primarily intended for relatively small NGOs that plan to establish or are currently maintaining a Resource Center. It provides examples related to reproductive health, but it is applicable to other topics. It is also designed to address concerns raised at the HAIN consultations regarding managing and organizing a resource center especially in an NGO setting. It aims to provide users with basic skills and knowledge in organizing materials to enhance their collection, improve the delivery of information, and effectively disseminate information to their partners.

The manual contains basic guidelines on how to operate a resource center with a relatively small collection and with limited resources. The manual may be used by resource center staff who may or may not have formal training in library management. It aims to cover the processes involved in organizing a resource center such as ordering materials, recording, organizing and promoting services, and presents them in a simple way.

We hope that, through this manual, resource centers would be able to take a more proactive role in helping the community they serve. We would appreciate any comments or suggestions for the improvement of this manual.

This manual does not intend to define what an ideal resource center should be, but rather, it is designed as a tool to help NGOs build and enhance their resource center operations for better delivery of information services. All decisions and changes that NGOs may want to implement will ultimately depend on the general objectives of the organization.

For purposes of clarification, the term “librarian” being used throughout this manual refers to the staff working in the resource center. We prefer to use the term “resource center” rather than library to illustrate a more proactive role in the organization and in the community. The term “partner/s” is being used rather than users, clients, or target groups to describe a two-way communication and participatory approach in building the resource center. It is important to note that we work with our partners rather than work for them. Partners contribute as well to the building of our collection.