# Current Status of Public Libraries in Vavuniya District, Sri Lanka: An Overview of Their Resources, Challenges and Roles in Providing Services to Society

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## Extended Abstract

## 1. Introduction

It is believed that libraries contribute to societal democratization in developing countries. The verses in Public Library Manifesto published in 1947 by IFLA, which emphasize that human values are sustained in democratic society where free and unlimited access to information, knowledge, thoughts, and culture are ensured through the establishment of public libraries (UNESCO 1994, in Ignatow et al, 2012).

North and East of Sri Lanka experienced a civil war over a period of 30 years. End of war in 2009 has tremendous effects on economic and social development of the North and Eastern strips of the country. Vavuniya is no exception to enjoy peace in uplifting socio-economic wealth along with literacy level. Vavuniya District is located in the northern province of Sri Lanka and covers a land area of 1966.9 Sq. km. It has boundaries shared with Mullaitivu, Anuradhapura, Trincomalee and Mannar Districts. The district has a population of 182,957 (Vavuniya District Secretariat, 2011).

In this regard, public libraries in Vavuniya District had noticeable influence in restoring stability in inhabitants' lives that was shattered during the war. Their proactive roles in reaching potential user communities and grass root level of society will ensure social democratization and literary wealth. A community that is well-informed and literate will easily overcome obstacles and challenges

when it commutes to achieve goals of socio-economic development and healthy environment.

The current study tries to understand the present status of public libraries in the district. A survey, equipped with structured questionnaire and interviews was used to collect data. There are ten (10) public libraries, where around forty five (45) library staff are employed. Since the population itself is small in number, no sampling was adopted. Therefore, librarians who are in-charge of public libraries were administered with structured questionnaires, whereas long-time users and retired public librarians were interviewed.

## 2. Public libraries in Vavuniya

It was observed that complete records on history are literally absent in respective public libraries in the district. It was unfortunate that government reports paid little or no interest in collecting and keeping information on libraries in the district. Many records have been lost during the internal displacements and inattentiveness of relevant officers during the turbulent period, as subjects revealed in interviews.

However, authors managed to gather information from published articles on librarianship in the district, and through interviews with librarians and staff of those libraries.

Literature on history of public libraries in Vavuniya traces back to the period of British Rule, and library services reportedly were paralyzed after 1990 due to the undesirable political situation in the country. Nevertheless, after 1995, political atmosphere had gradual improvements thus people restored the normalcy in life. Thereafter, library services in three different public libraries, located in Koomankulam,Omanthai, and Cheddikulam, had been revived and are still continuing their services to satisfy the needs of users (Theivendran, 2005).

Development of public librarianship was associated with shifting of Government Kachcheri from Mullaitivu to Vavuniya in 1936. Later in 1948, Vavuniya District secretariat was uplifted to township status. And, initiations to improve education in rural parts of Sri Lanka paved way to the inception of new public library of Vavuniya Town in 1959, with a collection of 500 titles and all dailies published during that time, which later grew through donations by NGOs like Care International and Asia Foundation (Kandasamy, 1999).

**Table 1: Public libraries in Vavuniya district and their grades**

| No. | Name of the public library | Authority | Grade given |
|-----|----------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| 01 | Vavuniya Public Library | Urban Council | Gr.II |
| 02 | Koomangkulam Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |
| 03 | Omanthai Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |
| 04 | Kanagarajankulam Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |
| 05 | Nedunkerny Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |
| 06 | Nainamadu Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |
| 07 | Cheddikulam Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |
| 08 | Pavatkulam Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |
| 09 | Maamaduwa Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |
| 10 | Ulukkulama Public Library | Pradeshiya Saba | Gr.III |

These public libraries are resourced with considerable numbers of books and periodicals. It was observed that no public library in the district is providing access to the Internet or any other electronic information resources.

Except Vavuniya Public Library which is equipped with an Integrated Library System (Koha) and CCTV cameras, others need to upgrade their resources and services to meet current needs of users, especially school and college students. In addition to keeping print collection and conventional information media, these libraries need to be automated and equipped with electronic information resources. However, their role in social change is conspicuously worth mentioning.

## 3. Roles and services

Public libraries in Vavuniya District play an important role in supporting the education of students from school level to university. There are two Educational Zones in this district Vavuniya North and Vavuniya South. Vavuniya North is divided into two divisions namely Omanthai and Nedunkerny and Vavuniya South is divided into two educational divisions namely Vengalacheddikulam and Vavuniya.

The total number of enrolments in 193 schools in the district is nearly 40,752 students who are taught by 2450 number of teachers. As many as one hundred schools are functioning in their own place, whereas 86 schools are sheltered in temporary sites and 07 schools are not operating at the moment (Vavuniya District

Secretariat, 2011). In this context, public libraries are vitally important in assisting rural education by providing supportive information resources, and promoting reading habits among children and adults.

In addition, Vavuniya Campus of The University of Jaffna, National College of Education and Technical College are the main institutions that promote higher education in the District of Vavuniya.Although these institutions are resourced with sufficient number of collections, public libraries also provide considerable level of support to their students who are living in remote and rural areas of the district.

However, public libraries in Vavuniya District, like many other of its kind in other districts, are predominantly inclined to lending service and, to ascertain extent, reference services. The role of Public libraries' is beyond just providing materials for lending and reading. They substantially influence socialization of inhabitants; especially those were displaced and re-settled. Public libraries can be excellent hubs of information and counseling to children who suffered the consequences of war and displacement.

In this regard, the following section highlights as to what challenges are hindering these libraries from providing state-of-art services in this digital age of information. It is not surprising that many of their reasons to stay behind the modernization of library services are mainstream and common to almost all public libraries in the island.

### 4. Challenges and proposals

Lack of funds is one of the primary and obvious challenges encountered by public libraries in the area concerned. On one hand, these libraries are not on priority list of government departments when it comes to allocating fund, on the other, budgetary allocations are apparently inadequate even to handle recurrent expenditure in majority of the public libraries surveyed.

Considering human resource scarcity, the survey results reveal that these libraries lack both required degree of expertise and sufficient number of personnel to ensure smooth operation. Respondents expressed that they need special training in customer care and bindery. They further suggested that higher authorities in government sector should be made aware of the importance of running a library successfully.

Limited physical space poses serious challenge to public libraries, especially in rural and sub-urban areas in the district. Librarians are of the view that they are unable to accommodate additional services such as for elders, special-need users, and children. Moreover, narrow space hinders keeping different collections to serve various user groups. For example, rare materials, Ceylon collection, children's collection, fiction, reports, and so forth.

Having considered resource strength and before mentioned challenges of these public libraries, initiating proactive services to public and enhancing existing functions are a must. Despite the obstacles, these public libraries need to step up to new levels by introducing mobile library services, holding exhibitions, sustaining reader circles, and guaranteeing cozy environments for their patrons.

Automation is curtailed by the absence of required ICT facilities and infrastructure. Many libraries do not even have computers. However, university librarians in Northern Province have taken initiatives to automate libraries with minimum IT infrastructure.

Libraries with required ICT facility should move toward digitization of demanded and rare materials to widen their services beyond time and space. This would lead to initiating museum and special sections to preserve cultural heritage of the zone.

More importantly, library professionals of Vavuniya Campus and the University of Jaffna should work in parallel with public libraries in providing technological expertise and advice, especially in automation and digitization.

## 5. Conclusions

Existence and roles of public libraries in any society cannot be undervalued, though the trend of using Internet resources is growing with time. Public libraries are considered as contributors in societal democratization, especially in war-torn zones. However, as to how far these community entities are exploited to satisfy user needs is a question. Public libraries in Vavuniya District, like any other public library in the country, face with severe financial shortages and problems of insufficient human resource to cater to their users. In this regard, these libraries need to prove their existence worth by experimenting and extending proactive services to reach potential users and grass root level of communities and thereby should try to attract the attention of authorities to obtain required funds. Automation and

of open-source software is one of the remedies to upgrade these libraries that are technologically disadvantaged. Meanwhile, university library professional should train public librarians and help installing novel techniques to sustain these social entities' existence.

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