



2013 Evaluation Report *Summary*



Prepared by READ Global, in collaboration with the research and evaluation firm Learning for Action (LFA).

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Background

Rural Education and Development (READ) Global partners with rural villages in Nepal, India, and Bhutan to improve quality of life and prospects for the future—particularly for women and children—through an approach that combines education, livelihoods, and community development. READ works with communities to establish Community Library and Resource Centers (READ Centers), which provide villagers with access to books, newspapers, publications, and information technology—as well as educational, women’s empowerment, and livelihoods programming—that rural villagers would likely not otherwise be able to access.

To determine the impact of READ Centers in these communities, READ worked with the research and evaluation firm Learning for Action (LFA) in 2012 and 2013 to develop a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework, and then field test the new evaluation plan in a sample of READ Centers in all three countries—five Centers in Nepal, four in India, and two in Bhutan. This report shares findings and recommendations from that field-testing process, focused on the following areas of impact:¹

- I. Access to, usage of, and exchange of knowledge, information, and resources;**
- II. Women’s empowerment;**
- III. Economic opportunities for community members;**
- IV. Community ownership of and engagement with READ Centers.**

To collect data on the extent to which READ Centers help rural communities achieve these outcomes, surveys were administered to a variety of Center users—specifically sampling women, youth, teachers, and livelihood training participants—as well as to Center Management Committee² members. The surveys were either self-administered or administered by READ staff and volunteers, depending on each participant’s literacy skills and their comfort taking surveys. In addition, mixed-gender and women-only groups of Center users participated in focus groups conducted by READ Staff and volunteers at each Center to provide more in-depth qualitative information about how the Center has facilitated changes for themselves and their families.

READ Global has been operating in Nepal since 1991, in India since 2007, and in Bhutan since 2008. As expected, the strongest outcomes in each impact area were reported in Nepal, where READ Centers have been operating for the longest amount of time. As READ Centers in Bhutan and India continue to operate, we expect to see even greater outcomes over time. Additionally, Centers’ program offerings vary in each country and community, depending on the area of greatest need. While women’s empowerment and economic empowerment programs are greatly needed in Nepal and India, in Bhutan, READ has focused more on increasing access to information and educating the country’s youth. The findings in this report reflect these different cultural contexts and programmatic priorities.

Many of the findings were quite positive in demonstrating READ’s impact in the communities surveyed. One reason that one intervention could produce such positive results is that, in many of these rural communities, the READ Center is the only place in the village where people can access the information and educational opportunities available there, so it is not surprising to see such positive outcomes.

¹ READ also collected data during field testing which indicate that Centers increase the culture of reading in Nepal and Bhutan and increase the social capital in communities in India. Because these outcomes were intentionally not prioritized in all three countries, we did not include them in this summary report. To learn more about these outcomes, contact READ Global.

² Center Management Committees are teams of volunteer community members elected by their peers to manage Centers.

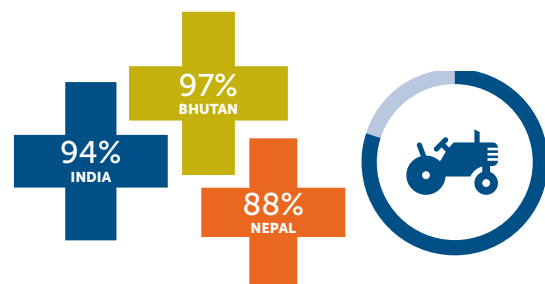
Key Findings

I. READ Centers increase access to, usage of, and exchange of knowledge, information, and resources.

Members of rural communities in Bhutan, India, and Nepal typically have limited access to information. Resources such as books, newspapers, magazines, and computers are scarce in many villages, and when they are available, they are typically too expensive for community members to afford. By providing access to knowledge and information through library resources—including practical information on highly relevant topics like health and agriculture—and by creating opportunities for community members to exchange information with one another, the evaluation found that:

READ Centers significantly increase community members' access to information:

In Bhutan, where READ Centers offer the only public lending library services in the country, 99% of Center users said they would not have access to some or all of the information if not for the READ Center. The majority of Center users in India (75%) and Nepal (67%) said they would not otherwise have had access to some or all of this information. Nearly all visitors (97% in Bhutan, 94% in India, 88% in Nepal) have used their Center to obtain information about health, including sanitation, hygiene, and general well-being. In Nepal and India, 80% of those surveyed used the Center to access information on agriculture, allowing community members to gain new skills, improve crop productivity, or start new businesses such as mushroom or spice farming.



Nearly all READ Center users have used the Center to access information about health. 8 in 10 from Nepal and India accessed information on agriculture.

READ Centers promote educational advancement: More than half of youth surveyed—between 56% and 60% across all three countries—use their Center's resources to help with schoolwork. The majority of teachers use books at the Center several times per month to build their knowledge, plan lessons, or use in the classroom. The vast majority of teachers in India (92%) and Nepal (84%) reported that students' attendance has increased moderately or very much as a result of having a Center in their community, and nearly all teachers (91% in India, 88% in Nepal) believe students' grades have improved as a result of the presence of the Center. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of teachers surveyed in Nepal and nearly all (95%) teachers surveyed in India reported that their students' passing rate of the School Leaving Certificate exam—a benchmark which denotes the completion of high school—has increased moderately or very much as a result of having the Center in the community, filling a critical gap in the school system for valuable educational resources. Eighty-eight percent of teachers in Nepal and 85% of teachers in India reported that enrollment of girls in their schools has increased moderately or very much as a result of having the Center in their community.³

³ Tracking student attendance rates was beyond the scope of this evaluation. These numbers are self-reported by teachers, but they suggest that READ Centers' educational resources can increase participation in education, especially for girls.

READ Centers increase community members' use of the Internet to find critical information:

Roughly half of Center users surveyed in Bhutan (47%) and Nepal (59%) and nearly three-fourths (73%) in India increased their comfort using computers. This evaluation was conducted before READ Global launched a formal information communications technology (ICT) initiative in 2014; however, even without formal technology programming, the data show significant improvements across all three countries in communities using the computers already available at Centers.

READ Centers enable users to regularly share information they gain from Center resources with others:

Sharing information is a sign that what Center users learn is valuable and relevant to them, and that Centers foster a culture of information exchange to increase knowledge in the entire community. It also demonstrates that Centers are having a positive impact even on community members who may not visit the Center. The vast majority of users surveyed (88% in Nepal, 96% in India, and 69% in Bhutan) reported sharing information learned at the Center with at least one person within the previous month. Additionally, over one-third of Center visitors in India and Nepal had shared information with at least 10 people. Health, economic issues, and agriculture are all pressing concerns in rural communities. A large majority of Center users across all three countries (81% in Nepal, 94% in India, and 70% in Bhutan) had shared health information in the last month with at least one other person, including information on hygiene and family planning.

II. READ Centers increase women's empowerment.

Women in all three countries report notable changes in their feelings of empowerment as a result of coming to READ Centers.⁴ The data demonstrated that simply providing a safe space where women are allowed to gather, share information, and learn is a significant driver of change. Some READ Centers also offer women's empowerment programs, trainings, and savings co-ops, which contribute to and enhance the outcomes women experience as a result of coming to the Centers.

Empowerment manifests in several significant changes for women, including increased confidence, self-esteem, comfort speaking in front of groups, and decision-making power. READ Centers increase women's feelings of empowerment by creating opportunities for them to leave their homes, share ideas and thoughts with other women, and gain new knowledge and skills. Additionally, economic programs available through READ Centers contribute to women's empowerment considerably by giving them the opportunity earn an income, contribute to financial decision-making in their homes, and provide for their families. The evaluation revealed three findings that emphasize the notable role READ Centers play in empowering women:

READ Centers offer a safe space for women to gather, problem-solve, and learn. Centers also dramatically improve women's autonomy: In India and Nepal, cultural barriers have traditionally limited women's ability to leave their homes unaccompanied and gather with other women.

⁴ While women in Bhutan do not experience oppression and restricted mobility in the same way women in India and Nepal do, the history of excluding women and girls from education and leadership positions has created a landscape where women rarely hold public leadership positions. READ Centers have high potential to enhance women's empowerment in Bhutan by creating a non-intimidating and welcoming space for women to increase their education and knowledge and to build confidence and leadership skills. READ Centers in Bhutan introduced women's empowerment programming—with a particular focus on decision-making and knowledge about health and economic opportunities—in the fall of 2013 and it will be a core focus of their program model moving forward.

As a result, women have few opportunities to talk with one another or to access resources and information to increase their knowledge and skills. Women shared overwhelmingly that the presence of the Centers in their communities has dramatically improved their opportunities; the Centers are uniquely safe and trusted community spaces in which they can gather, share information, learn, and increase their feelings of empowerment. Three-quarters of women surveyed in India (77%) and Nepal (75%) reported that they can now travel outside of their home more often because of their community's Center. In Nepal, many women reported in focus group follow-ups that the Center is the only place where they can gather to talk about women's issues and empowerment. Once they are at the Center, women in India and Nepal increase their social networks and the Centers give them opportunities to learn from each other.

READ Centers offer trainings and services that directly contribute to improved economic opportunities for women: Economic opportunities can increase women's status in their family and community by making them income generators. Many Centers in Nepal and India offer livelihoods trainings, and women at those Centers have learned skills that have helped them generate an income. Several Centers in Nepal have savings cooperatives through which women invest a small amount of money each month, and take turns receiving loans from the shared savings. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of women surveyed at Nepal's READ Centers with savings cooperatives have increased their income or savings and one-fifth have started their own income generating businesses. In India, women who participated in livelihoods skills trainings reported that their improved economic opportunities were directly linked with increased confidence and feelings of empowerment.

Visiting READ Centers helps women increase their confidence, self-esteem, and decision-making power: A majority of women (83% in Nepal, 66% in India, and 58% in Bhutan) report that their confidence has increased moderately or significantly since coming to the Center. Similarly, a large majority of women in Nepal and India (80% and 79%, respectively) and nearly half of women in Bhutan (42%) report that they have increased their self-esteem since coming to the Center. About two-thirds of women in India (68%) and Nepal (62%) report that they have more decision-making power in their homes or communities as a result of coming to the Center. Nearly all women surveyed across all three countries—ranging from 97% to 100%—identified at least one area in which they now have more decision making power, including decisions about health care, spending, child-bearing and family planning, children's education, and their own travel and mobility. Additionally, between 20% and 24% of women surveyed in Nepal, and 24% of those in India report that they have become a leader in their community since engaging with the Center and increasing their confidence.



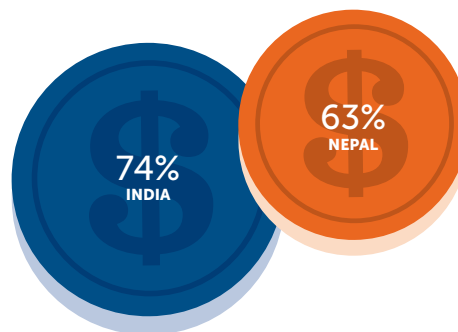
Increased confidence and self-esteem has enabled the majority of women surveyed in all three countries to speak comfortably in front of groups.

III. READ Centers increase economic opportunities for community members.

READ Centers increase economic opportunities for community members by offering livelihood trainings, savings cooperatives, and in some cases, employment opportunities through the sustaining enterprises. Increased literacy and computer literacy are also drivers of increased economic opportunities for Center users. The evaluation findings reveal that Centers contribute substantially to increased economic opportunities, increased income, and in turn, improved quality of life:⁵

READ Centers provide resources and trainings that provide economic benefits to users:

The majority of Center users in India (74%) and Nepal (63%) report that their income has increased moderately or very much as a result of increased access to information, knowledge, and skills at the Centers. In Bhutan, where Centers had not yet implemented formal programming to enhance economic outcomes at the time of the data collection, 12% of Center users report increased income. A majority of Centers users (76% in India and 64% in Nepal) report that their ability to take care of their family's economic needs has increased either moderately or very much because of the Center.



The majority of READ Center users in Nepal and India reported that their income has increased moderately or very much as a result of accessing Center resources.

Livelihood trainings offered at READ Centers enable attendees to earn more income and improve their quality of life:

Livelihood trainings give community members a chance to generate income by providing them new skills. Trainings include agriculture, handicrafts, animal husbandry, tourism and hospitality training, and more, based on the economic markets in the communities. All Center users in Nepal (100%) and 76% of Center users in India who were surveyed immediately after participating in a livelihood training reported that what they learned in the training would be somewhat or very beneficial to them. A large majority of livelihood training participants (97% in Nepal and 79% in India) reported that without a Center in their community, they would be able to gain none or only some of the skills they learned during the training. A majority of livelihood training participants (76% in Nepal and 86% in India) who completed a survey weeks or months following the training report said that their income has increased since the training. Additionally, between 85% (Nepal) and 97% (India) of training participants reported that they had later referred members of their family or community to the training. Participants also reported that their incomes had increased as a result of the training (76% in Nepal and 86% in India), and used their newfound income in meaningful ways: more than half of participants in Nepal (55%) report that they can better pay for health care and send their children to school, and 45% are better able to pay for food. In India, 86% of participants reported an increased income, 73% of participants can better pay for food, 68% have increased their access to health care, and 63% are better able to send their children to school.

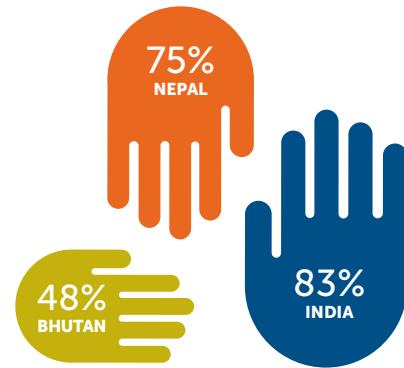
⁵ READ Centers in Bhutan had not yet started offering formal livelihood skills trainings at the time that the data was collected.

III. READ Centers successfully foster community ownership and engagement.

By engaging the community in establishing, maintaining, and sustaining the READ Center, READ cultivates authentic community ownership over Centers, ensuring their success in the long term. The impact of this deep partnership with communities is evident in the evaluation's findings about the engagement in and ownership of READ Centers that community members feel:

Community members contribute significantly to their READ Centers:

At least three-quarters of Center users in India (83%) and Nepal (75%) have contributed in some way to their Center, and nearly half (48%) of Center users in Bhutan report contributing in some way to their Center. The most common way community members have supported the Center is by volunteering time. Three-quarters (76%) of Center users surveyed in Nepal, 57% in India, and 36% in Bhutan have volunteered their time to support their local Center. In Nepal, where READ has been operating for more than 20 years, 43% of users made financial contributions to a READ Center, with 49% of women and 38% of men donating money. The proportions of community members making financial contributions are much lower in India and Bhutan (14% and 2%, respectively), which requires some more research to understand. In Bhutan, this may be partially explained by the fact there are very few NGOs working in the country, leaving very little precedent for community volunteerism and engagement.



Community members in all three countries have contributed to their READ Center by volunteering time, donating money, participating in committees, or helping launch new programs.

Community members have a strong sense of ownership and of belonging to their local READ Centers:

A large majority of Center users across all three countries (96% in both Nepal and India, and 80% in Bhutan) feel a sense of belonging to their local Center. In Nepal and India, approximately two-thirds of Center users (67% in Nepal and 63% in India) report that they feel like the Center is somewhere they belong very much. Only 21% of Center users in Bhutan feel this way, so READ plans to look into this further through follow up conversations to understand why community members' sense of belonging appears to be lower in this country.

Center users, including youth, feel strongly engaged in decision-making about their Centers' programming and resources:

The majority of Center users—ranging from 63% to 80% across all three countries—report that they have had opportunities to engage in decision-making about their local READ Center at least some of the time. Additionally, nearly three-quarters of Center users in Nepal and India (73% in India and 72% in Nepal) believe that their opinions have at least some influence over decisions about the Center's programming and resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

LFA's evaluation findings strongly suggest that READ Global has developed a unique and highly effective model for bringing education, women's empowerment, and sustainable economic development to rural communities in South Asia. In the spirit of learning for action, LFA reflected on promising aspects of READ's approach and provided recommendations for moving from the evaluation findings toward actionable next steps, which are summarized below.

1. **Maintain and increase availability of health information and resources:** Center users report high rates of accessing health information and sharing what they learn with their families and other community members. READ should encourage Centers to maintain or expand their selection of relevant health materials and resources, to offer more health trainings, and to partner with health providers and organizations where possible to bring health information and care to communities.
2. **Ensure and expand resources for teachers and students:** Teachers and students in all three countries underscored the important role READ Centers play in filling resource gaps in the education system. READ is encouraged to work with Centers to ensure that educational resources are regularly updated, in stock, and relevant to community members' needs, as well as promote more engagement between the Center staff and teachers so that additional materials can be added to the Center.
3. **Expand women's empowerment programming to more READ Centers:** While simply having the space for women to gather, learn, and share contributes to meaningful increases in women's feelings of empowerment, specific programming enhances empowerment outcomes. READ's effect on women's empowerment is a clear strength of the model; READ can further the reach and depth of its women's empowerment outcomes by expanding this programming to Centers that do not currently have programming, and by including it as a fundamental component of new READ Centers in the future.
4. **Continue offering and expand livelihood trainings to promote economic advancement:** Community members who participated in livelihood trainings reported meaningful changes in their economic opportunities and earnings. READ should continue to encourage and support Centers to offer livelihood trainings as part of their programming, and to expand trainings to Centers that do not yet offer them.
5. **Maintain deep and authentic partnerships with communities from the point of initiation as a core aspect of the READ model:** In Nepal and India, where community engagement is high throughout all phases of READ Center development, community ownership of READ Centers is strong. It may be worth exploring how to replicate this further in Bhutan, to help elevate community ownership in that country.

READ has already begun implementing some of these recommendations, particularly ways to provide more health resources and expanded women's empowerment and livelihood trainings. In addition to these concrete recommendations, READ and LFA will be working together in 2014 to codify how READ should continue to conduct evaluation work in addition to the monitoring work and data collection already being done.

To read the full evaluation report drafted by LFA, or to learn more, contact impact@readglobal.org.