

Evaluating outreach engagement practices of public libraries in the Kalutara District, Sri Lanka, with special reference to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the outreach and engagement activities conducted by officers in charge of public libraries (PLs) in the Kalutara District of Sri Lanka and their alignment with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The main objective was to identify and analyse the outreach activities conducted by officers in charge of PLs in the Kalutara District. The study also examined the associations between the level of outreach activities and the designation categories and educational qualifications of the officers in charge of these PLs. A structured questionnaire was used as the data collection tool. The entire population of PLs (N = 64) was included in the study, and the response rate was 67% (n = 43). Both thematic and statistical analyses were used. Six themes of outreach activities emerged: (i) Reading Promotion and Literacy Engagement, (ii) Health Awareness and Wellbeing Outreach,

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(iii) Skill Development and Livelihood Support, (iv) Mobile Library and Inclusive Community Services, (v) Cultural and Community Engagement Programs, and (vi) Environmental Awareness Initiatives. These themes aligned with activities and the educational qualifications of the officers in charge of PLs ($\chi^2 = 0.88$, SDGs 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 13, and 15. No significant association was found between the level of outreach activities and the designations of the officers in charge of PLs ($\chi^2 = 3.77$, $p = .583$). Moreover, no significant association was found between the level of outreach $p = .927$). It is recommended that outreach activities be integrated into a structured framework aligned with the SDGs, supported by capacity-building programmes, targeted training sessions, short courses, impact-assessment initiatives, monitoring indicators, institutional support mechanisms, sustainable funding pathways, and stronger community partnerships to standardise community outreach activities in the study sample.

Keywords: *Public Libraries, Outreach Engagement, SDGs, Community Empowerment, Kalutara District, Sri Lanka*

Introduction

Public libraries (PLs) in Sri Lanka are among the most visible and service-oriented knowledge hubs serving diverse user populations. They cater to a broad spectrum of intellectual, educational, and informational needs of different communities. As community-based institutions, PLs function as centres for literacy development, lifelong learning, research support, cultural preservation, and social inclusion (IFLA & UNESCO, 2022). In recent decades, PLs have gradually adopted a more transformative, outward-looking role in response to evolving socio-cultural and technological needs. Consequently, they

have expanded their traditional functions beyond the physical boundaries of the libraries. Outreach engagement activities have emerged as a strategic and structured approach through initiatives aimed at marginalized and underserved populations (Bertot, Jaeger, & McClure, 2010).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015), provide a comprehensive framework for addressing a wide range of societal challenges in the global context. Libraries are widely recognized as important institutions that contribute to the achievement of SDGs. This role is also acknowledged by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) as well as UNESCO (IFLA & UNESCO, 2022). Given adequate resources and competencies, the PLs are better positioned than academic libraries to engage in community outreach activities.

The emerging need for PLs to engage in community-based outreach programmes is supported by research conducted worldwide, including Sri Lanka. These outreach initiatives are focused on different developmental areas such as health, education, social well-being, environmental awareness and digital literacy. PLs are no longer considered custodians of books. Instead, they have gradually become community hubs that respond to various societal needs in an equitable manner (Nature Research Intelligence, 2026).

In response to this emerging role, PLs have been increasingly recognized as important community institutions, playing a pivotal role in advancing the United Nations' SDGs through inclusive, community-focused services. Rather than functioning as repositories of information, these PLs have actively been engaged in outreach initiatives that address critical social, educational and developmental

needs at the local level. These initiatives encompass a wide array of programmes, including literacy development, digital skills training, dissemination of health information, and strategic partnerships with local organizations. Such efforts have directly contributed to multiple SDGs such as Quality Education (SDG 4), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) and Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11) (Aregbesola, 2023; Swamy, 2025)

In addition, PLs provide accessible and welcoming spaces for marginalized and underserved populations, enabling equitable access to information and fostering lifelong learning (Shafack, 2020). Despite this growing recognition of their multifaceted contributions, there remains a notable gap in empirical research concerning the implementation of such programmes, particularly within developing countries. Nevertheless, collaborative partnerships with external stakeholders can enhance the capacity of public libraries to contribute to sustainable development within communities (IFLA, 2023).

PLs in the Central Province of Sri Lanka have partially implemented green library practices in waste management, cleaning, energy efficiency, gardening, natural ventilation, and eco-friendly lighting, despite being largely unaware of the green library concept. However, alignment of these practices to the United Nations' SDGs remains unsatisfactory. The study advocates initiating library-driven activities to foster environmental awareness among communities and nurture eco-friendly readership (Premarathne & Bandara, 2019).

According to Wickramarachchi (2021), PLs in Sri Lanka have now shifted from their formal custodian roles to active community outreach engagements. He emphasized that this shift links public librarians' social responsibilities directly to the SDGs. Consequently, all library personnel require continuous professional development and

training to develop these essential competencies. PLs are accessible to anyone in society, and they can be considered non-commercial learning spaces. They enable citizens from diverse educational backgrounds and social statuses to access knowledge without prejudice. With proper training, library officers would have the potential to serve their communities effectively. According to Krishanthi and Gamage (2024), Sri Lankan university libraries also follow SDGs via localized initiatives but lag behind other global libraries due to tight budgets and lack of awareness.

In 2024, a four-day workshop was held by the American Corner and D.S. Senanayake Memorial Public Library, Kandy, Sri Lanka, in partnership with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), to identify projects and programmes aligned with SDGs and to rigorously measure and evaluate their impact (IFLA, 2024). According to Siriwardana (2025), the PLs in Anuradhapura remained resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic but maintained limited partnerships with civil society, highlighting the need for strengthening outreach activities. Together, this evidence shows that there is a growing emphasis among Sri Lankan PLs to engage more in outreach activities that are aligned with the United Nations' SDGs.

The Kalutara District in the Western Province of Sri Lanka is widely recognized as an economically and commercially developed district. However, certain areas of the district remain predominantly rural and face limited access to social, educational, and infrastructural resources. Consequently, disparities in human, physical, and infrastructure resources are evident among communities within the district. Altogether, 64 PLs are functioning under 14 local government authorities, including 03 Municipal Councils, 02 Urban Councils, and 09 Pradeshiya Sabhas (Western Provincial Council, n.d.). These

libraries serve diverse communities distributed across urban, semi-urban, and rural areas of the district, with notable variations in the availability of information resources, service provision, and staffing patterns. These variations largely reflect differences in the socio-economic and educational contexts of the communities served. Nevertheless, PLs in the district perform functions that extend beyond routine library operations. Many libraries actively engage with their communities through outreach initiatives designed to address the diverse informational, educational, and social needs of their user populations.

The officers responsible for managing these PLs come from varied professional and educational backgrounds. Typically, the head of a PL, who oversees and coordinates all library operations, is referred to as the Public Librarian. Depending on the resource availability and the scope of the library operations, the officers-in-charge of these PLs hold different professional designations.

Recent studies in Sri Lanka indicate a gradual shift of PLs toward outreach-oriented services. However, there remains a notable lack of in-depth analyses, particularly at the district level. There are only a limited number of case studies examining such activities. This gap in empirical evidence poses challenges for informed investment in capacity-building initiatives. In response, the present study examines outreach activities undertaken by officers-in-charge of PLs in the Kalutara District, with special attention to their alignment with the SDGs. It also explores whether variations in the designations and educational qualifications of the officers are associated with differences in their level of engagement in outreach activities.

Research Problem

Aligning with the rapidly evolving needs and expectations of their communities, public libraries have progressively expanded their traditional service models to include diverse outreach initiatives that support education, literature and entertainment, socio-economic and cultural development, and also environmental sustainability. Although this transformation has been remarkable, there is little evidence on how their outreach initiatives align with the United Nations SDGs. Therefore, there is a need to carry out a research study examining the kind of outreach engagement activities conducted by officers-in-charge of public libraries in the Kalutara District, Sri Lanka.

The main challenge is the disparity in professional staffing across PLs. The individuals managing these institutions hold different designations. These designations range from qualified public librarians to library assistants and even field labourers. This variation creates an unexamined gap in understanding how community outreach activities are implemented in these different settings.

Another research question considered in this study was the extent to which these activities align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By answering this question, the study identifies the extent to which these PLs contribute to the complex SDGs that create an important impact on each community.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study was to identify and thematically analyse the outreach activities conducted by officers in charge of public libraries in the Kalutara District, Sri Lanka.

Specific Objectives

1. To investigate whether the outreach activities conducted by officers in charge of PLs in the Kalutara District are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2. To explore the relationship between the designations of the above officers and the level of outreach activities they conduct.
3. To find out the relationship between the educational qualifications of said officers and the level of outreach activities they conduct.

Methodology

A survey design incorporating quantitative and qualitative data was used to conduct the study. It facilitated the systematic collection of information and enabled the identification of current outreach engagement practices. Special focus was given to outreach activities that contribute to achieving the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The target population consisted of officers in charge of public libraries in the Kalutara District. A structured, self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions to gather demographic characteristics, educational qualifications, and professional designations, while open-ended questions were used to gather information on outreach activities and community engagement.

As the study population was manageable (N = 64), a census approach was adopted without selecting a sample. Officers in charge were included because they are the main administrators responsible for planning, implementing, and supervising outreach activities in their respective PLs and therefore have comprehensive knowledge of library services and community engagement initiatives.

Results

Among the 64 eligible participants, 43 returned questionnaires. Therefore, the response rate was 67%. Among the respondents (N = 43), five professional designations were identified: Library Assistants (N = 19, 44.2%), Librarians Grade III (N = 15, 34.9%), Librarians Grade II (N = 4, 9.3%), Librarians Grade I (N = 3, 7.0%), and Field Labourers (N = 2, 4.6%). These participants represented PLs which were operating at diverse levels of staffing, resources and infrastructure facilities, across the district.

Completed questionnaires were thoroughly checked for completeness prior to completing data extraction and analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Associations between selected variables, including professional designation, educational qualifications of the officers, and levels of outreach engagement, were examined using the Chi-square test of independence. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 28.0, with statistical significance set at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$).

Responses related to outreach activities were further analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The responses were read repeatedly to become more familiar with the data before generating the initial codes. Subsequently, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. These broader categories were refined into six main outreach themes that reflected the major types of PL outreach practices identified in the district. These themes were then mapped against the relevant UN Sustainable Development Goals to examine the contributions made through outreach activities of PLs toward sustainable community development.

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were well

informed of the purpose of the research. The confidentiality and anonymity of the information provided were maintained during data analysis and reporting.

Data Analysis

The study combined thematic analysis, descriptive statistics (counts and percentages), and inferential statistics (chi-square tests). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method was used to analyse the outreach activities conducted by the officers in charge of the PLs through the following six phases.

1. Phase 1: Familiarization with the data
2. Phase 2: Generating initial codes
3. Phase 3: Searching for themes using the initial codes
4. Phase 4: Reviewing the themes
5. Phase 5: Defining and naming the themes
6. Phase 6: Producing the comprehensive report

Phase 1: Familiarization with the data

A comprehensive list of outreach activities conducted by the officers is given in Appendix 1. According to phase 1 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method, two researchers thoroughly studied and reviewed the outreach activities. Each PL was assigned a specific number from a running series of numbers from 1 to 43.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

The dataset was systematically reviewed, and codes were generated. Meaningful data segments were aggregated together to create open codes. This facilitated organizing raw data into meaningful groups.

Table 1

Initial coding of outreach activities

PL No	Initial Codes
1	mobile services, welfare program for people with low income, reading program for children with special needs, health camps for nursery children, reading camps
2	mobile service, educational session, health camps
3	general knowledge competition, health camps, literary programs for literature month
4	drug abuse prevention programs
5	reading programs
6	mobile library service, book donations to other libraries, children's day program, handicraft creation program, reading camp, literary competitions for school children, programs related to literature month and reading month, self-employment training, story hour program
7	reading programs, reading competitions
8	reading camps, mobile service, health camps, meditation programs for elders
9	reading programs
10	program for reading month
11	establishing a home library initiative, library awareness programs for Sunday school children, free memberships for reading month, reading promotion activities for pre-school children, library introductory programs for pre-school children, a disease prevention awareness program, distributing bookmarks to readers, awareness program on child abuse, organizing competitions for the provincial council literature contest and awarding certificates and prizes, plant distribution program, parental worship program, a cultural/entertainment program, an entertainment program in parallel with world children's day, elder's day program, conducting an awareness program to guide Tamil-medium

educated children, towards employment opportunities, free Tar
language courses, soup dansala, free-eye-testing program, recognizi
the outstanding borrow

- 12 short-term courses for self-employment
- 13 dhamma preaching programs for elderly users, cookery programs
- 14 awareness programs for unemployed women, literary contest
aligning with the literacy month
- 15 mobile services for nursery and school children, empowering
unemployed women promoting self-employment, literary
entertainment programs for elderly people, storytelling hour for
nursery children, offering free memberships within the reading
month, conducting various literary contests during the literacy
month
- 16 awareness sessions on home gardening with the support of
agricultural instructors, awareness sessions for women in elderly
homes on women's diseases and non-communicable diseases,
workshops for unemployed individuals
- 17 mobile reading services, health camps
- 18 mobile reading service for pre-school children, general knowledge
competitions for school children, self-employment training sessions
for unemployed women
- 19 story-telling programs for nursery kids, singing competition
programs for elderly societies, health camps, special reading
programs for children with special needs
- 20 storytelling programs for children, children's day programs, elders'
day programs, programs for self-employed women to meet and
interact with government officials, women's day commemoration
programs, programs for national festivals, programs to improve
social relationships among villagers
- 21 free courses on the Korean language, free courses on beauty culture,
donation of books and accessories to school children from low-
income households, new year fair to motivate small-scale
entrepreneurs

- 22 story-telling sessions for school children, reading programs for elderly people, reading programs for pregnant mothers, meditation programs for elders, reading contests for children
- 23 mobile reading services for elderly homes, health camps, beauty culture programs for women
- 24 health awareness programs for pregnant mothers, promotional programs for unemployed people, health clinics, mobile reading services for pre-school kids
- 25 awareness sessions for pregnant mothers, entertainment programs for elders in elderly homes, story-tallying hour for pre-school kids, motivational sessions to promote self-employment for unemployed individuals in the region
- 26 health camps for women, literary program for school children
- 27 programs for women with low-income, supporting sessions for selecting bucket subjects for grade 9 students, organize exercise sessions for women over age 35,–art sessions for hyper-active children for stress relief, sessions for stress release after the grade 5 scholarship
- 28 cultural programs
- 29 mobile book services to the hospital and police station of the area
- 30 mobile book service, health camps
- 31 educational sessions for targeting O/L examination; mobile service; and health camps for elders; story telling sessions for pre-school kids
- 32 organize sessions for readers for the reading month and the literature month; training on promoting the unemployed for self-employment; more mobile services etc.
- 33 reading sessions for pre-schools children; health sessions on non-communicable diseases;
- 34 cultural program with local artists

- 35 storytelling sessions for children
- 36 book donation drive
- 37 tree planting program
- 38 career guidance workshop for youth
- 39 book donation program
- 40 tree planting program
- 41 tree planting program
- 42 career guidance workshop for youth
- 43 cultural program with local artists

Phase 3: Searching for themes using the initial codes

After creating initial codes, data segments were organized into broader patterns called themes, as indicated in Table 2. Codes were systematically clustered into tentative thematic categories. This facilitated the transition of isolated data to a conceptual framework.

Table 2

Searching for Themes Based on Initial Codes

Suggested Theme	Related Initial Codes
Reading programs and literacy activities	reading programs, storytelling sessions, reading camps, literary competitions, essay competitions, library introduction sessions
Health awareness programs	health camps, disease prevention awareness, drug abuse prevention, NCD awareness, eye-

	testing programs; meditation sessions
Skill development and self-employment training	handicraft creation, vocational training, beauty culture programs, entrepreneurship support; career guidance workshops
Mobile Library and Community Services	mobile services to schools, hospitals and elderly homes; remote outreach; special-needs reading services
Cultural and community engagement Activities	cultural programs, festival events, dhamma preaching, children's day and elders' day programs, entertainment programs
Environmental and Community Development Activities	tree planting programs; home gardening awareness; environmental outreach

Phase 4: Reviewing the theme

According to phase 4 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, the two researchers carefully reviewed the initial rough themes. During the theme review phase, particular attention was given to maintaining the coherence and distinctiveness of each theme. The consistency between the identified codes and the developed themes was carefully re-examined to ensure that the themes accurately captured the meaning of the coded data. Similar or overlapping codes were combined, while unnecessary or irrelevant codes were removed. As a result, a refined set of themes with clear and meaningful boundaries was established. The following refined themes were identified after

reviewing and refining the initially developed preliminary themes.

1. Reading promotion and literacy engagement
2. Health awareness and wellbeing outreach
3. Skill development and livelihood support
4. Mobile library and inclusive community services
5. Cultural and community engagement programmes
6. Environmental awareness initiatives

Phase 5: Defining the Themes

After reviewing the themes, the scope of the relevant themes was defined. The underlying meaning of the theme in relation to PLs' outreach activities was elaborated. The key concept relevant to each theme was considered. The major concern throughout this process was to ensure the relatedness of initially developed codes with the themes developed. Table 3 indicates these definitions of the confirmed themes.

Table 3

Definitions of the themes

No	Theme	Definition
01	Reading promotion and literacy engagement	The outreach initiatives targeting the enhancement of reading habits and literacy skills of children from different age groups and a diverse set of individuals in the community served by the PLs.
02	Health awareness and wellbeing outreach	Programs focused on promoting physical and mental well-being through community education.
03	Skill development and livelihood support	Outreach activities that support community empowerment through vocational training and capacity building programs.
04.	Mobile library and inclusive community services	Outreach services are delivered beyond the physical library space, through mobile library programs, to

ensure equitable access to information.

05	Cultural and community engagement programs	Outreach activities that strengthen social interaction and cultural participation within the community.
06	Environmental awareness initiatives	Outreach activities promoting environmental awareness and sustainable practices in the community.

Phase 6: Producing the comprehensive report

The key concepts of the reviewed themes were synthesized to structure the reporting of results. The analytical interpretation and critical discussion of these themes are presented in the Discussion section, where their significance is examined in relation to public library outreach practices.

The first objective of this study was to investigate whether the outreach activities conducted by officers in charge of public libraries in the Kalutara District are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The alignment of the main outreach activity themes identified through the above analysis with the United Nations’ SDGs is mentioned in Table 4.

Table 4
Alignment of the identified themes with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Identified Theme	Aligned SDGs
Reading promotion and literacy engagement	SDG 4 – Quality Education
Health awareness and wellbeing outreach	SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being
Skill development and livelihood support	SDG 5 – Gender Equality; SDG 8 – Decent Work & Economic Growth

Mobile library and inclusive community services	SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities; SDG 11 – Sustainable Communities
Cultural and community engagement programs	SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities & Communities
Environmental awareness initiatives	SDG 13 – Climate Action; SDG 15 – Life on Land

The second specific objective of the study was to explore the relationship between the designations of the above officers and the outreach activities they conducted. The composition of the different designations of officers in charge of PLs is shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Composition of officers by designation (n = 43)

Designation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Library Assistant	19	44.2
Librarian Grade III	15	34.9
Librarian Grade II	4	9.3
Librarian Grade I	3	7.0
Field Laborer	2	4.6

The distribution of outreach activity levels according to staff designation, indicating how different categories of library personnel are grouped across low, medium, and high levels of outreach engagement, is shown-in Table 06. It is a cross-tabulated overview that allows comparison between professional grades and support staff regarding their involvement in outreach activities.

Table 6

Distribution of outreach activity levels according to staff designation

Designation	Low	Medium	High	Total
Library Assistant	13	6	0	19
Librarian Grade III	10	3	2	15
Librarian Grade II	2	1	1	4
Librarian Grade I	2	1	0	3
Field Laborer	1	1	0	2

No statistically significant association was found between the designations of officers in charge of PLs and the levels of outreach activities conducted by them. It was found using a chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 3.77$, $p = 0.583$). The third specific objective of the study was to find out the relationship between the educational qualifications of said officers and the level of outreach activities they conducted. Table 7 shows the distribution of different activity levels of officers in charge of PLs according to their educational qualifications. It shows how officers with different educational qualifications are categorized across low, medium, and high levels of outreach activities. It provides a cross-tabulated overview to examine the relationship between educational qualifications and the level of outreach activities conducted.

Table 7

Distribution of different outreach activity levels according to the highest educational qualifications of the officers in charge of PLs

Educational Qualification	Low	Medium	High	Total
Degree	4	3	0	7
G.C.E. A/L	21	9	2	32
G.C.E. O/L	3	0	0	3
Total	28	12	3	43

No association was found between the educational qualifications of the officers PLs and the level of outreach activities they conduct ($\chi^2 = 0.88$, $p = 0.927$).

Discussion

The discussion is organised according to the study objectives: (01) thematic analysis of outreach activities, (02) alignment of outreach activities with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (03) relationship between the designations of officers in charge and outreach activity levels, and (04) relationship between the educational qualifications of the officers and outreach activity levels.

(01)Thematic analysis of outreach activities

According to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method, the themes that emerged were: (i) Reading promotion and literacy engagement (ii) Health awareness and wellbeing outreach (iii) Skill development and livelihood support (iv) Mobile library and inclusive community services (v) Cultural and community engagement programmes, and (vi) Environmental awareness initiatives.

Theme 1: Reading Promotion and Literacy Engagement

A literacy-focused outreach activity, which correctly lies within the scope of the duties of a library, showed an interesting variation. Storytelling sessions, literary competitions and reading camps conducted for different segments of the community, showed how the creative activities conducted by the public libraries have reached a wider community, beyond the library users. This highlights the efforts these PLs are making to promote reading culture and educational participation among the community. Literacy promotion activities were widely identified across many PLs in the study sample, making it the most dominant set of outreach activities. This theme strongly aligns with the PL mandate.

Theme 2: Health Awareness and Wellbeing Outreach

The common activities that appeared under this theme were: health camps, non-communicable disease (NCD) education, eye-testing camps, disease prevention sessions and meditation programmes, etc. Most of the time, the targeted community groups were particularly vulnerable. As an example, the libraries (mentioned using their code) PL 24 and PL 25 organized a health camp for pregnant mothers; PL 1 and PL 2 organized health awareness sessions for children. This is a progressive observation that would, in turn, help local health authorities access vulnerable communities in collaboration with PLs. This also demonstrates that PLs can serve as accessible community hubs for reaching vulnerable populations.

Theme 3: Skill Development and Livelihood Support

Various programmes, such as career guidance sessions, awareness sessions related to entrepreneurship, community empowerment activities, and vocational training and awareness sessions were some of the activities identified under this theme. The interesting aspect of these sessions is that they always focus on small-scale, achievable businesses. As an example, PL 6 and PL 12 organized workshops which trained people for handicraft production. PL 18 and PL 21 organized training sessions on beauty culture and had stalls at New Year fairs. These are simple and achievable tasks for unemployed women in the community, which could be carried out while attending to their family duties. Another positive aspect observed under this theme was that local government officers, such as Agricultural Extension Officers, were facilitated to access the communities through the direct involvement of PLs.

It was observed that many skill-development programmes conducted by PLs in collaboration with local authorities were focusing on the unemployed community. There is potential to further extend these

programmes to different employment categories in both the government and private sectors, with attractive sponsorships.

Theme 4: Mobile Library and Inclusive Community Services

This theme reflects the notable efforts made by PLs to shift from static library-based operations to flexible outreach activities. This reduced the barriers that the community had to access information. As an example, PL 1 and PL 8 conducted mobile book services for nursery children; PL 23 aimed at elderly homes; PL 29 focused on hospitals and police stations; PL 31 aimed at schools. A notable characteristic observed in these mobile services was that these services were often accompanied by awareness sessions (educational and health awareness sessions.). The findings of this study indicated that, these mobile outreach services were primarily based on the community needs irrespective of the educational qualifications and the professional hierarchy of the officers in charge of PLs. This theme reflected the positive trend among PLs in the Kalutara District in ensuring information equity.

Theme 5: Cultural and Community Engagement Programs

This theme extended its focus beyond the traditional services of a PL. For example, PL 34 and PL 43 conducted cultural programmes with artists; PL 13 held a Dhamma preaching session for elderly people in the community; PL 20 held national day celebrations with community interactions; PL 11 held entertainment programmes aligned with Children's Day, etc. One notable feature of these programmes was their less structured nature. These activities contributed a lot to social cohesion and harmony. Also, such activities provided opportunities for officers in charge of PLs to present themselves as responsible and distinguished figures in their respective communities.

Theme 6: Environmental Awareness Initiatives

This theme highlighted the valuable contribution of PLs to environmental sustainability. For example, PL 37, PL 40, and PL 41 conducted awareness sessions on tree planting; PL 16 had an awareness session on home gardening; PL 11 conducted a plant distribution programme. One notable characteristic of these activities was that agricultural extension officers working in the local communities were also collaborating with PLs on such activities. The ecological responsibility of PLs towards the communities they serve is mirrored by such activities. However, compared to activities related to other themes, environmental awareness initiatives showed a smaller number of activities.

(02) Alignment of outreach activities with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Although the PLs have not deliberately pursued the United Nations' SDGs, they have addressed community needs through appropriate outreach activities, and these activities have naturally aligned with the SDGs. It was noted that the PLs were catering to immediate local needs. This is a good indicator of the adaptive nature of the PLs in the Kalutara District. It also showed how the officers in charge of PLs were involved in practical interventions to cater to their respective communities. The uneven distribution of themes across the SDGs shows variability in institutional capacity, personal commitment and partnership roles. This observation can be used as the foundation for future programmes that can be conducted with more structured and coordinated SDG-oriented outreach activities. It can help ensure the long-term sustainability of such programmes.

While individual themes align with various SDGs, an overarching observation is the unifying alignment of all six themes with SDG 17:

Partnerships for the Goals. The successful implementation of these outreach activities highly depends on collaborative frameworks, inter-institutional support, and strategic partnerships.

(03) Relationship between designation and outreach activity levels

According to the chi-square analysis, the relationship between the level of outreach activities conducted by officers in charge of PLs and their designations was not statistically significant. The findings did not indicate a statistically significant association between hierarchical position and the level of outreach activities. It is suggested that the quantity and quality of outreach activities are driven more by individual commitment, attitudes, local community needs, available partnerships than the job titles of officers. While higher-grade librarians were expected to conduct more outreach activities, lower-grade staff in charge of some PLs had led a more extensive number of activities. This observation challenges the presumption that outreach activities are driven by the professional seniority of officers in charge of PLs. This is a positive observation relevant to human resources and recruitment limitations.

(04) Relationship between educational qualifications and outreach activity levels

According to the analysis, no statistically significant relationship was observed between officers' educational qualifications and their outreach activity levels. This observation suggests that the findings did not indicate a statistically significant association between formal academic qualifications and the level of outreach activities. It suggests that the experience, community-driven nature of public librarianship, practical knowledge, different local networks, and personal interests and motivational factors play

a more influential role than the academic qualifications of officers in charge of PLs. Officers with the highest educational qualifications were expected to conduct more outreach activities, but the themes identified were present across all qualification levels. This is also a positive finding regarding human resources and recruitment constraints. There is also evidence to suggest more training for officers in charge of PLs on outreach activities, irrespective of their educational levels. It is better if a common platform could be created which facilitates all officers in charge of PLs in the Kalutara District to share their experience among themselves.

Conclusion

The findings highlight that these outreach activities extend beyond the traditional work role of PLs. The thematic analysis revealed different outreach dimensions: (01) Reading promotion and literacy engagement (02) health awareness and wellbeing outreach (03) Skill development and livelihood support. (04) Mobile library and inclusive community services (05) Cultural and community engagement programmes (06) Environmental awareness initiatives. This highlights the developing role of PLs as community development hubs. While addressing the pressing needs of different communities, these activities showed meaningful alignment with several SDGs despite the absence of evidence of any deliberately structured SDG-aligned collective programme. Moreover, the lack of significant relationships between outreach activity levels and the designations and educational qualifications of officers in charge of PLs was an interesting finding of this study. It further suggests that effective outreach activities conducted by officers in charge of PLs are shaped more by factors such as individual motivation, community needs, and collaboration with other local authorities, than by formal professional hierarchy or educational qualifications. Collectively, the findings highlight the adaptive and

grassroots nature of PLs' outreach activities in the Kalutara District of Sri Lanka and underscore the potential for strengthening these activities through further coordination and the provision of resources and support mechanisms.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to further strengthen the outreach activities not only in PLs of Kalutara District but also across the Sri Lankan public library sector.

It is recommended that outreach activities be streamlined into a clearly defined strategic framework, giving special attention to the United Nations' SDGs. The relevant governing authorities should formulate and implement comprehensive policy frameworks specifically addressing outreach and community engagement services, to further strengthen, standardize, and streamline the process. Such frameworks will be more efficient than isolated ad hoc activities to sustain these initiatives within public libraries. It is also suggested that training sessions be organized for officers in charge of PLs, to strengthen their outreach activities which could be extended even to short courses and impact assessment programmes that would contribute to standardizing the entire process. Establishing monitoring indicators could also enhance the quality of these activities. Proper institutional support mechanisms could also facilitate the smooth functioning and funding for these activities. Considering the positive and powerful impact of outreach activities on the local communities, such activities could be considered as a core function of PLs in Sri Lanka, which in turn may provide a basic focus for the funding authorities. Strengthening community partnerships and collaboration is another recommendation to enhance the PLs outreach activities.

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