

When I Give, I Own:
Building Literacy through READ Community Libraries in Nepal

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Working with communities in the most remote areas in Nepal, READ—the Rural Education and Development international nongovernmental organization—is helping to build community libraries and fill them with rich resources of information and books. Partnering with Nepali communities to develop self-sustaining library community centers, READ is revolutionizing the very definition of library and outreach to communities that hunger for resources and greater empowerment. In this article, we describe our evaluation of READ and its pioneering approach to promoting information and literacy. We also describe how this model may effectively inform literacy efforts here in the United States, and well as in global communities throughout the world.

Background

Under the auspices of International Reading Association, my colleagues and I were invited to conduct an evaluation of community libraries in Nepal. At a time of rapid expansion for the READ organization, both in Nepal and in other global communities, the evaluation was designed to examine evidence of READ's influence on the educational, social and economic productivity in village communities. Specifically, the project sought to better understand how community libraries, serving as storehouses of knowledge and information, might provide a vital and powerful community resource for supporting literacy, social change and social justice through empowerment in Nepal.

Despite making progress in raising living standards in recent years, Nepal has remained one of the world's poorest countries (UNESCO, 2002). Although discrimination on the basis of caste has been illegal since 1963 (Pande, 2004), discriminatory social practices persist in the rural areas, along with restrictions on occupational mobility. Indigenous nationalities, consisting of 37% of Nepal's total population and speaking over 100 languages and dialects, have been displaced from their traditional homelands, denied access to land rights, and subject to heavy taxes through unpaid labor (Bhattachan, 2003). Illiteracy rates, estimated by UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2002) represent a quarter of the total population (8 million). Gender inequity, more pronounced in the rural areas of the country, is profound, with only one-quarter of all women minimally literate (Pande, 2004).

Launched in 1991, Rural Education and Development—READ—set out to address these issues through the development of community libraries and community literacy. This type of “literacy in practice” (Singh, Acharya, & Koirala, 2003) postulates that people are already learners and that what they need is locally relevant materials to facilitate new learning. Such an approach values the sets of practices, and culturally determined literacies that already exists in a community (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), and focuses on how these practices can be used to upgrade and generate new resources that might ultimately reduce poverty. In this respect, community literacy is intimately tied to educational, social and economic development (Pande, 2004).

Hoping to diminish the isolation, vulnerability, and marginality in which many Nepalese citizens live (Khati, 2003), READ was designed to create, advance and leverage a replicable library-based model for sustainable economic development. Since then,

READ has partnered with 41 Nepali communities to develop self-sustaining library community centers.

The READ Model

For Nepal, a country whose population largely resides in villages beyond a handful of urban centers, rural education and development is central to enhancing prosperity and advancement. Today, over 90% of the population is rural, with many villagers isolated due to Nepal's geographic remoteness, limited roads, electricity, and communications (Pande, 2004). Strengthening communications in these villages to promote greater awareness about education, health, sanitation and human rights, therefore, represents a key aspect of empowerment.

In the past, educators and other social services have initiated campaigns or programs to improve basic education, providing resources, information services in the fight against illiteracy. For example, the National Education System Plan attempted to use distance learning to provide improve adult literacy and help adults become more economically productive. Costs associated for upkeep, however, eventually crippled the spirit of the initiative, leading to erratic and often inaccessible service (Khatri, 2003). Similarly, cost-factors have limited the availability of general education in the country; government schools require fees from the children they serve, leaving many peasants living in rural areas without any educational resources. International initiatives to revive and use libraries and information systems for literacy development in the past (UNESCO, 2002), as well, have unfortunately not successfully prevented their overall decline and deterioration.

In contrast to a traditional exogenous approach, the READ model is based on asset-building community development (Cunningham & Mathie, 2002). Drawing from both Vygotskian and neo-sociocultural perspectives, it builds on the premise that people have “funds of knowledge,” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and life experiences that can be harnessed for positive pedagogical actions. It attempts to link people’s ways of being in the world—their talking, thinking, acting, and valuing (Barton & Hamilton, 1996) to promote local literacy practices and enhance economic prosperity.

The model (Shrestha, 2005) places high priority on community collaborative efforts that can be used to increase economic productivity through income generation activities that make the best use of the community’s own resource base. It builds on:

- Identifying and analyzing a community’s past successes to strengthen people’s confidence in their own capacities to take action.
- Engaging people as citizens (rather than clients) in development and promoting empowerment and ownership.
- Involving individual and community talents, skills, and assets (rather than focusing on problems and needs).

READ libraries work like this: Based on the needs and demand from the community, READ provides initial financial support for the establishment of the library. But from the very outset, the library is owned, managed, and run by the communities themselves. They must contribute the land for the building of the library, and share at least 15% of the initial costs. Further, each community is responsible for supporting the library with at least one sustainable income-generating project. These income-generating

projects, differing from place to place depending on geographic location, include rental stores, fish ponds, printing press, ambulances and other services needed in the community. Income from these projects must meet the costs of staff, newspapers, book acquisitions and book repair. Both the library and the sustainability project, therefore, are used as developmental catalysts for many other initiatives in the community.

Overview of the Evaluation Design

Our purpose was to examine the impact of READ's unique model toward improving literacy opportunities among children and adults, and serving to stimulate successful social entrepreneurship. Comprehensive community-based initiatives (Neuman & Celano, 2006) represent an important and promising opportunity to improve a broad array of educational, social and economic outcomes in communities. At the same time, their very comprehensiveness, and uniqueness in meeting the needs of individual communities have traditionally presented tremendous challenges to evaluators. Among the attributes that make them difficult to evaluate include the individual nature of communities, the range of community dynamics, the boundaries of the initiative, as well as the absence of appropriate controls for comparison purposes.

To address the complexity of such initiatives, evaluators have applied new strategies to provide evidence for community-based evaluations (Connell, Kubisch, Schorr, & Weiss, 1995). These strategies entail using multiple methods that individually may not be wholly satisfactory but that together may provide substantial markers of progress. Such methods might include conducting surveys and selective interviews or focus-group discussions, establishing a community self-monitoring capacity, as well as

visual ethnography techniques (photographs that highlight certain characteristics of an environment) (Neuman, 1999). By triangulating data, evaluators can provide a more textured picture of what may be happening in these community settings that may inspire confidence in the scientific validity of the results.

To provide an overview of libraries, and library services, we constructed surveys, designed to give us background information on all community libraries supported by READ. One survey, targeted to the READ staff, focused on management issues, including monitoring, accountability, and data management issues. Another survey examined the library practices in each community, including outreach activities, sustainability projects, as well as challenges and successes in maintaining library services. These data were returned and analyzed three weeks prior to our visit to Nepal.

From these initial data, it was clear that libraries and their services varied across several important criteria. For example, older, more established libraries reported more outreach activities than ones that were just getting started; villagers in small, rural areas seemed to use libraries as their single point of contact more than those in large marketplaces; remoteness versus ease of access appeared to affect levels of community involvement; cultural differences and cultural norms seemed to play an important role in the potential impact of these libraries. Consequently, our second strategy was to employ a purposive sample (Yin, 2002) to explicitly examine some of these differences.

Since the basic question of the evaluation was to address whether the activities consciously undertaken in these community-based initiatives provided greater literacy opportunities for children and adults, influencing economic and social development, we established as best as possible a series of comparisons. We sought situations that could

allow us to compare libraries and communities. To better understand how community members used print resources, for example, we sought to examine how an older, more established library might compare to a library that was just getting started. We compared libraries in rural areas with more urban libraries near marketplaces. In each case, by comparing and contrasting situations (rural vs. more urban; lower caste vs. Brahmin; remote vs. close to a market place) we sought to compare how these libraries functioned—essentially answering the question: How might these libraries differ? How might they appear alike? What would have happened in the absence of the library?

The in-depth analysis of libraries occurred over a three-week period in Fall 2006. Following our arrival in Kathmandu, we met as a team with READ/Nepal staff, conducting interviews, and reviewing documents to examine the READ model. Together, we visited two libraries to refine our questioning strategies. Each member of the team was subsequently dispatched to a different region of the country to observe a total of four libraries, seeking to examine how each of these community-based resource centers influenced educational, social, and economic empowerment (see Table 1)

Table 1 about here

We independently and systematically examined the community context of each library, the management structure, the sustaining projects, and the outreach efforts in each community. Structured interviews were scheduled to meet with the management team in each library; focus groups were conducted with women's groups, as well as

school leaders and teachers in the immediate area. Photographs were taken at each site, highlighting the environmental features in the library. In addition, as time allowed, we visited villages, market places, school libraries, and activities in the local community. Once these independent observations were completed, we returned to Kathmandu to review our observations, triangulate our findings, discuss any discordant events, and examine emerging themes throughout the data. These initial findings and tentative interpretations were presented to a representative group of the READ community for member checking to examine whether our findings were plausible. Based on their comments, and questions, the results we reported were regarded as consistent and dependable (Merriam, 1998).

What We Found

Despite advances in recent years, children in rural areas in Nepal have limited opportunities for literacy learning. The current infrastructure for education is poor. School officials indicate that average class size can range from 80 students per class in the early grades to 60 students in the upper grades. Teacher training is minimal, with only 25 hours required for teacher preparation.

Schools suffer from a paucity of materials. Workbooks in various subjects shape the curriculum. Walls are bare, aside from the alphabet print in Nepali and English in most



classrooms. School libraries are limited or nonexistent; literature books, if any, often preciously locked away in cabinets.

Promoting literacy to the indigenous people has represented a tremendous challenge. Understandably, due to poverty, and unemployment, subsistence has taken precedence for many over education. During the planting and harvesting season, for example, children are likely to be absent more than two weeks in a month; temporary migrations due to employment in other areas may even extend these absences. Therefore, how to engage people in literacy activities that are meaningful, accessible, and tied to a community's most immediate and pressing needs represents a critical step in establishing a book culture for literacy development.

READ libraries are filling a critical gap in this difficult equation, exerting a powerful influence on literacy activities, economic and social development in Nepal. Our experiences weave together a portrait of how literacy may be critically tied to prosperity, equity, and poverty reduction in developing countries.

Creating Access to Literacy Materials

As shown in Table 2, READ libraries provide books and other resources for communities that often have limited access to information. Libraries, open 12 hours per day with the exception of festivals, generally contain a rich resource of pamphlets, books, magazines, and materials for all ages.

Insert Table 2 about here



Books are catalogued by color to denote subject, often interfiled, with adult and children's reading books catalogued together, ranging from easier to harder reading levels. The average number of books per library is about 3,500; however, this figure varies across communities. Laxmi library, visited by all three evaluators, for example, contained over 6,000 books.

READ libraries, however, contain more than tomes of books. Each library includes a children's section with books and a toy library filled with Montessori-like manipulatives.



All libraries also include a computer room (with 1 or more computers), printers, photocopiers, and occasional internet access, and video and television for the community to watch movies and cartoons. Some libraries also have a room for meetings and special gatherings.

Greater access to materials represents an important step toward helping the Nepalese people attain critical literacy skills. Yet, perhaps even more extensive, are the strategies that community members used to support reading development. Each library, for example, develops its own weekly “wall newspaper”—a newspaper with a bit of national news, along with many contributions made by the local community. Such easy access to local news helps to view the library as a community center for information.



Outreach to the Community

Involving the local community in library activities, however, is not left to chance. Using strategies described as “participatory rural appraisal” (World Bank, 1994) to help

to identify the needs of the community, outreach is a vital part of each library. Sita, a volunteer from Jhuwani's library told us:

“When we started the library, there were no women users. We thought about how to increase the participation of the library. We created a subcommittee and we called a meeting. No one came. I asked one woman why she did not come and she told me she couldn't write her name.

So we encouraged them-- telling them it was not necessary to write or speak. We said--if you want, you can say something about your experience. We know you have a lot of experience about children. You can share. You can sing a song, or tell us a story. You have a lot of knowledge. This is your place.

They started to speak—they told us what happened in their home, and even people who could not express their name, they began to speak up. We were so encouraged. Slowly, and slowly, the women came, and when we announced that there was a leadership program, we had so many women, we couldn't stop them.

Outreach activities like these, organized first by the local management committees, then taken on by active volunteers, recognized that literacy involvement often occurred through practical action. Although regarded as a key mechanism for social mobility and advancement, literacy attainment was seen a long-term goal. More immediate, were practical concerns. One member of the woman's commission put it this way. “They see it as a source of information. If they have problems, they visit the library.”

In each of the libraries visited, we found the beginnings of a book culture developing through these outreach activities (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Some activities were organized specifically around reproductive health issues, or employment. In one library for example, a room is dedicated to women's health. A doctor visits once a week, and meets with women's groups on family planning issues. But other times, the activities are more informal. Visiting at Argyole library,

“We like to come and read books, watch TV and listen to AV during our leisure time which is about 12:00-2:00 each day. Together we talk about health issues, and how to get coordinated, how to raise our goats. We talk about what to do when there is no doctor, and then we'll build a course around these issues.”

According to READ/Nepal program officers, mobilizing villagers in rural areas has been more successful, where cooperation is essential for existence, than in more urban areas. Visiting a migrant family in a region with untouchables, the library is seen as a source of liberation. Interviewing a young woman living in a small hut with 14 other family members, we found that she was studying to be a health teacher. She wakes up every morning at 4:30, walks many miles to the local college, cooks for the family, and is the assistant secretary on the management team for the library. When asking why she

volunteers, she said simply, “Books are my passion.” She and other untouchables are welcome in the library.



In such rural, poverty areas, school is often seen as a luxury. Because of the harvest and many chores, one day one child may go to school, and then the next day, another child will be given the opportunity. In 10 of these libraries, early childhood

educational programs in addition to the toy libraries help to provide a basic safety net. Children come for half-day periods, and have classes that focus on health and cleanliness. They play with the Montessori-like toys, learn basic alphabet skills, read stories, watch TV cartoons. As one person put it, “Children used to play with mud and stone. Now they play with books and toys.” For some children, these classes will constitute their only education.

In the Jhuwani community, volunteers have established a form of a mobile library for parents and children who must work in the fields all day. Considered a great honor to host a library, a person is chosen to act as a local librarian, with selected books and toys placed in her hut for the neighbor’s use:

The women gathered together and decided who would be the most appropriate person to have a mobile library. Who could lead us? Who should we give the responsibility to?

Selecting a woman with great local knowledge, we visit her hut where on a little table there is a selection of books, and toys neatly aligned for children to play with.



READ's libraries have benefited, as well, from collaborations with other INGOs. The Open Knowledge Network project, introduced in Nepal in 2005, runs in a number of READ supported centers. Designed for sharing knowledge that adds value to people's lives, its mission further supports libraries as a knowledge source. Visiting a local community, we meet a woman who identified a type of snail which proved to be helpful in curing a particular virus. She shared this information with the knowledge network. Similarly, another woman happened to look a book where a mother died as a result of eating an excess amount of bitter nuts. She warned her community about it through the Open Knowledge Network.

From these and other experiences, our observations indicated that READ's participatory approach facilitated information sharing, analysis and action among these key stakeholders. These advances have gone far in making the case for literacy improvement, demonstrating the important connections between literacy and empowerment.

Literacy Development and Economic Productivity

Observations and interviews indicated that READ libraries are improving the lives of villagers through sustainable economic empowerment activities (see Table 4, for examples). Moreover, the asset-based community library model appears to have had both direct and indirect effects on economic productivity in rural areas.

Insert Table 4 about here

For example, these projects have brought different castes together in joint activity. In Lek Nath, the cell phone went out, forcing the ambulance service, the sustainability project run by the Newars (a business caste) into a crisis. One person in the community, a Tharu (an indigenous caste), however had a land line, and generously agreed to help the ambulance in its work for the community. "Day time, night time, all the time he does his duty," says one villager with great pride. And with great respect from his community, he continued to help until the situation got better.

Women are heavily involved in economic activity in Nepal, yet in the past have not benefited monetarily from their work. They take care of the household, work in the fields, and tend to the animals while their husbands seek employment often in other countries. Fourteen hour days are not unusual in the rural woman's life, burdened by poverty, and limited opportunities. Serving as information centers, READ libraries have had some effects in discontinuing this negative spiral. As one member of the management team mentioned:

“Who doesn't want a better life? But they have no way. What can they do without growing food? They have an interest in helping their children, but they have no money. We know their condition—we are citizens of this community. And we believe if we give them information, they can slowly lift up their life. Our interest is to improve their livelihood through economic activities. Without that, their living standard will not increase.”

Perhaps the greatest stride in economic development has resulted from the savings and loans cooperatives emerging in each of the READ libraries. Using participatory rural appraisal strategies, these associations have had effects on empowering core groups of women. An example of this strategy:

We get women to sit in the round and discuss what they want to happen. They put stones and things down and say what they have on their mind. Cultural

practices; traditional practices. We discuss different kinds of businesses—we use a lot of tools.”

From discussions like these, women in these villages have created a savings and loan cooperatives (One library has 41 different groups) serving both to help families through emergencies, as well raising important capital for greater employment. Visiting one meeting, they follow a common practice:



We collect our savings, and ask if any one needs to take a loan. As a group we debate the terms of the loan and when and how the loan must be repaid. So the meeting begins by first pooling our money, then, asking who needs money, and then deciding the loan period, the interest rate, and when the money must be returned.

We also talk about home and social affairs. One woman is pregnant, and we talk to her about what cereal to eat, how much fruit she must eat, how to measure. We

show her books about it. Once, women used their thumbs to check out these books. Now they can write their names.

READ's contributions to economic empowerment and to the mobilization of marginalized groups are deepening efforts to break down disparities that currently exist among gender, caste, and indigenous groups. These efforts are likely to make critical contributions to the economic development of citizens in Nepal.

Literacy and Social Development

Social inequities continue to plague progress in Nepal. Continuing discrimination of indigenous groups, the low status of women, systems of patrilineal descent, rules of inheritance have interacted to isolate and subordinate many of the citizens throughout the country (Singh et al., 2003). Poverty reduction and progress is ultimately tied to solving these social inequities. READ libraries are sponsoring programs that not only help



people become aware of these societal and cultural forces at work, but to better understand how to influence these dynamics.

Libraries have provided a focal point for meeting in the community to discuss common issues. It

brings people together, not only through its sustaining projects, but its clubs. Before the library, women had difficulty leaving home. Focus group discussions revealed that the library has become a legitimate destination for meeting. In fact, one woman reported that her guardian increasingly sends her to the library to get more information.

Women's clubs have emerged in all 41 libraries. Many want to learn about women's rights and laws that pertain to them. One group, for example, has studied how to get a citizenry card, allowing them for the very first time to claim property, obtain a bank account, and become a part of an association. Further, women have taken on important leadership roles on management committees, librarians, teachers, activities through which they have developed an important voice.

READ libraries have mobilized other community members as well.



In each community, libraries have sponsored vocational educational programs including candle-making, bee-keeping, and crafts to sell in the tourist markets. In Srijana, the local beekeeper, according to one estimate, now makes over \$1000 a year, and is coordinator of the agricultural section in the library. Relationships like these have become engines for further community action. Asking community members what their library's greatest success has been, for example, one older gentleman proudly said, "social

unity. The library has built social unity and cooperative feeling."

Our observations suggested that the social unity that bounded people together resulted from community-driven development. Starting a new library, the president of the management group tells us this story, “We gathered our parents. We prayed to our God which is our custom. And all of our parents put a stone in the middle of the circle. And later in a special ceremony, we collected a donation from each stone. Some people had only a penny; others, only a handful of sand. But together we received more than 1500 household donations to support our library.

Perhaps the most telling story of all, however, was a management committee member’s who said, “When I give, I own. My children have the right to use this library. If anything goes wrong, if anything is not working properly, let us plan together. All of us are stakeholders in this democracy.”

What can We Learn from READ?

READ libraries are serving a critical role in helping disadvantaged and marginalized groups use new opportunities to become better educated, and economically and socially empowered. We believe there is much that can be learned from the READ model for programs in the U.S., as well as for other highly industrialized nations.

First, the approach builds on community’s assets—its strengths, and not its deficits. There are no layers of bureaucracy. Rules are not imposed on people. Leadership teams are established by the people in the community. Leaders live in the community, understand it, and are ultimately accountable to their immediate constituency. When problems arise, community members along with their local leaders

discuss problems, argue, and ultimately pose new solutions that may benefit the entire community.

Because each community is unique, each library is distinctive, serving the interests, needs, and supports of their local citizenry. Libraries in agricultural areas become information centers for issues relating to livestock, farming, and water. Libraries in more urban areas use their local's funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) to produce products that might create sustainable income streams. Similarly, book selections in the library are based on what is important to the community members. In this respect, the libraries are a reflection of the communities in which they reside.

Second, serving as community resource centers, libraries broadly define outreach to include activities that are important to the community. Outreach activities are not created for them; rather, the community members themselves make these decisions. They use their meeting spaces to provide health clinics, lectures on reproductive rights, vocational classes specially targeted to the immediate needs of the community. Through their rich array of activities, they are breaking down caste barriers, drawing in a broad diversity of people who want to take advantage of their services. In each case, they are meeting people "where they are" to create new opportunities for learning and development.

And third, these libraries are addressing literacy development not through formal literacy training but by tying literacy activities to practical action. Literacy becomes a tool for knowledge generation to improve one's economic and social life. As a result, it is seen as functional, and serves a purposeful role in attaining goals.

Specifically, in summarizing some of the best practices of the READ model, we found:

- Open access to a broad constituency. Libraries are open 12 hours each day, 7 days a week.
- Books and outreach activities are related to community needs in the language of their patrons
- Books and constructive toys create a center for early childhood education
- Libraries are owned and operated by the community through sustainability projects that support economic and social development.
- Many opportunities for women and indigenous people to lead in their community and to participate in activities, helping them develop voice and free communication with others.

READ libraries have made tremendous strides in improving access to a wide number of information resources. Still, there is much work to be done.

Administratively, for example, READ lacks data systems necessary to accurately track circulation, and attendance figures. Consequently, quantitative analyses of the impact of libraries on literacy development, a crucial missing element, must await further analysis.

Further, READ needs to work with communities to build a greater infrastructure for their libraries: Librarians need better training to accurately catalogue materials; many of the books currently indexed have been donated by outsiders, and are unattractive, inaccessible (due to language), and outdated, taking up valuable space in the libraries. Finding resources in Nepali on topics that are of vital interest to the community would only enhance the connections between literacy and empowerment. Further, partnering

with organizations to provide literacy training for adults and story hours for children, many of whom have had to drop out of school, would help to strengthen their reading and writing skills and build additional opportunities for work and greater social mobility.

Growing from one library in 1991 to 41 in 2007, READ community libraries have energized the Nepalese people in rural areas to engage in spirited dialogues about their own future educational, economic and social development. It is a powerful model; and an exportable one. Communities throughout the world can benefit from embracing this highly participatory approach to literacy, social and economic empowerment.

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Table 1. List of Libraries Visited

Laxmi	Central Nepal	Urban, highly diverse
Jhuwani	Southern Nepal	Tharu, low caste
Argyole	South Central Nepal	Terai
Rameshor	Southern Nepal	Semi-urban
Srijana	Southeastern Nepal	Poor, lower-caste
Madumalai	Eastern zone	Mixed Terai culture
Sangam	Southeastern Nepal	Brahmin, Newar
Thak	North Central Nepal	Thakali, semi remote
Puthang	North Central Nepal	Thakali, entrepreneurial
Lekh Nath	Eastern Nepal	Brahmin, Newar
Dholakha	North Central Nepal	Urban, diverse

Table 2. Characteristics of READ Community Libraries

Current cost of a sustainable library	\$46,000
Total number of computers in READ libraries	95
Average number of books	3,500
Average number of villagers employed by READ library	5
Number of librarians trained since 1991	75
Toy libraries	41
Average hours open	12 hours per day/ 7 Days a week
Contributing members	10,279 Males 5,131 Females

Table 3. READ Outreach Activities

The following are examples of the most prevalent outreach activities:

Community meetings

General health clinics

Women's health clinics

Blood drives

Investment and micro-financing training

Women's entrepreneurship training

English classes

Literacy Classes

Animal livestock workshops

Women's discussion groups

Vaccination drives

Peace-building conferences

Leadership training

Book days

Wall newspaper training and production

Mother's classes

AIDS awareness programs

Table 4. Sustainability Projects

Types of Services	Number of Libraries
Telephone	6
Ambulance	3
Rickshaw	1
Saw Mill	1
Printing Press	1
Storefronts	14
Storeroom	5
Meeting Hall	4
Catering	3
Machinery Building	1
Loan	5
Fisheries/Livestock	2
Souvenir Shop	1
Tourist Services	1
Total Number	48
