

## The Library on Wheels *Infobus* - A Library at Will of the Farmers

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### Abstract:

*“Knowledge without boundaries” is an EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) motto that we are following. We have overcome these boundaries by “driving” information to the farmers’ yards in the villages in Macedonia. This paper presents the activities and outcomes of the project Library on wheels (Infobus) - library at will of the farmers. This mobile library provides support to the farmers of Shtip and Karbinci municipalities in their effort to acquire knowledge according to their will. It delivers information in the field of agriculture and offers application of ICT skills. Through established Agricultural Corner within the mobile library-INFOBUS, a bus equipped with laptops, high speed internet access and literature from different areas of agriculture it serves the needs of the farmers. This paper also presents the new innovative role of the Regional public and University library Goce Delcev in Shtip, Macedonia and the real purpose of its mobile library-Infobus that replaces 19 of missing rural libraries in the region. The Infobus, passes through 14 villages and 5 suburban parts in Shtip and Karbinci municipalities, offers assistance to the farmers to use information and communication technology for their agricultural needs and other services related to farming. The project “Infobus-Library on wheels-library at will of the farmers” has changed farmers’ lives, as well as library’s picture to serve all target groups even in remote villages and delivered the most needed information for the certain users. The Government subsidies for the agriculture with € 120millions for the year 2012 and offers access to IPARD (Instruments for Pre-Accession Assistant for Rural Development) funds from EU. The driving idea was to train the farmers how to apply for these funds by using their acquired ICT skills and information collected for them. A special web site [www.Agrocorner.mk](http://www.Agrocorner.mk) has been developed especially for this purpose.*

**Keywords:** agriculture, education, library, farming, non-formal education

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## ***Introduction***

Following the Republic of Macedonia's National Strategy on Agriculture and Rural Development<sup>1</sup>, the Government provided subsidies in agriculture in € 120million for 2012 and as a country with pre-accession status offered a use of IPARD funds (Instruments for Pre-Accession Assistant for Rural Development) from EU. But, majority of farmers find the application procedures too complicated for them to apply. It was obvious they needed help for this possibility, which lead to collaboration between the Regional public and University library "Goce Delcev" Shtip along with the Office of Rural Development of the Goce Delchev University in Shtip and Shtip Regional Office of the National Extension Agency, to find a way and support farmers to achieve their goals in that field. This innovative idea recognized by EIFL-PLIP R2 Program<sup>2</sup>, was a good example to all the Public libraries in Macedonia. In order to publish gained experience and make results publically accessible an "Agrocorner" web portal was initiated ([www.Agrocorner.mk](http://www.Agrocorner.mk)). Information was set on the Library web site as well ([www.nubgdst.edu.mk](http://www.nubgdst.edu.mk)).

Most of the farmers don't have internet access in their homes. The response to these problems was the establishment of ***Agricultural Corner*** placed at the Infobus for farmers. In the Infobus a library collection with professional agriculture literature and equipping with Lap Tops and fast Internet connection was offered for farmers use. This "***Library on wheels***" visited and will continuing visiting the farmers periodically offering services and trainings. The "***AGROCORNER***" -***Web portal*** offers lots of information and is very useful for the farmers during and after the project ends.

Infobus is a travelling information library service built in a bus, a form of mobile library that visits 14 cities and 5 suburban parts from the Municipalities of Shtip and Karbinci, with estimated population of 20.000 citizens. These are highland and hard to reach villages and have no libraries in their environment.

## ***Farmers and farming opportunities in the Municipalities of Shtip and Karbinci***

The Municipality of Shtip is located between the heights of the Isar, Merite and Kumlak, along the length of the two rivers, Otinja and Bregalnica as an east Macedonian center is one of the oldest cities in Macedonia. It is spread on an area of 893km<sup>2</sup> where according on the latest census live 47.796 citizens. Shtip is the center of the East planning region and borders with seven municipalities. Municipality of Shtip includes 71 places with inhabitants and it has about 5.000 rural populations.

The Municipality of Karbinci holds a wide area in the middle basin area of the Bregalnica River and it expands to the north-western slope of the Plackovica mountain, through the wide valley of the Bregalnica River to the hilly morphological field on the north-western side of the Ovche Pole. The territory of the Municipality is 259 km<sup>2</sup>, a middle-ranked Municipality by size in the Republic of Macedonia. There are 29 populated areas, all rural environments with more than 4.000 inhabitants.

The two Municipalities belong to the Eastern planning region. The climatic conditions in the region are favorable for agriculture, especially for rice production. The rice fields in the Eastern region cover about 95% of the total rice production in the nation. The agricultural land is 165.639 hectares, about 14% of the total agriculture land, and 88.075 hectares are

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<sup>1</sup>National Agricultural and Rural Development Strategy (NARDS) for the period 2007-2013, Government of Republic of Macedonia, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy, Skopje, 2007

<sup>2</sup>URL:<http://www.eifl.net/regional-public-and-university-library-goce-delcev> [2013.05.05]

grasslands. Rice, barley, wheat and maize are also nurtured in this region which implies that there is a solid ground for livestock production. Because of the favorable natural conditions for agricultural development it can be concluded that this industry has a high potential to speed up the economic development of the region. Other developed branches are fruit and grape growing. There is also big potential in animal husbandry, especially sheep and goat breeding, maybe even bigger in the milk and meat industry, because 40% from the pig breeding in the nation is in this region. Through the conducted analysis, interviews and informal conversations with the participants, it can be concluded that the agriculture as a fundamental economic branch in the region needs developing. Agriculture in these villages is implemented traditionally as a family heritage, and not as a market-oriented business. The lack of information between the farmers is evident – hence the need to inform them about the new technology and the available resources they could have. Because of this situation with them as directly affected, we encounter resistance or indifference to the need for change.

Today in Macedonia, there are a lot of funds secured in order to increase the development of the agriculture. But, the farmers are not educated and they don't know how to apply for them, how to decrease their costs, and how to implement new technologies and skills. A major part of the farmers do not have the information about the programs, and they can't use their funds to develop their agriculture. This handicap is mostly the biggest reason for not using the services that are available. We live in an era with quick technological development in which the biggest role has the use of computers and Internet. Major parts of the farmers don't know how to use the computer or the Internet therefore they can't use the available information, too. Till now, there has never been implemented such kind of project for the farmers as a target group, there have never been implemented such kind of trainings, neither by the state institutions, nor the NGOs, for the problems that the farmers face on a daily basis.

The villages in the Municipalities of both Shtip and Karbinici don't owe libraries, except the ones in the schools. But, there's the Infobus – the library on wheels – which visits the villages once a week, so the villagers can use it by borrowing literature, and using the Internet at the same time. The Shtip Regional office of the National Extension Agency, according to their Program for work and the politics of the Macedonian Government, in order to upgrade their capacities and knowledge for actualizing their agriculture implement some training on topics that are important for the farmers. Because of the agency's headquarters which is in the city, there's a problem in reaching the villagers, especially the ones in the remote villages. Based on these facts and the analysis of the implemented project by the National Library in Jagodina, Serbia, the Regional Public and University Library "Goce Delcev" in association with the NGO "Sinergija" and the Municipalities both of Shtip and Karbinici and the University "Goce Delcev" Shtip, conceived the project named: A library on wheels -a library at will of the farmers.

### ***The Mobile Library-INFOBUS service to support farmers***

The unique service was established by Mobile Library-INFOBUS as **"A Library on wheels"** as support for the farmers from the municipalities of Shtip and Karbinici, justifying the notional mission **"A Library at will of the farmers"**

Our public library along with the Office of Rural Development of Goce Delchev University and Shtip Regional office of the National Extension Agency, supported farmers to achieve their goals in that field, not only from Shtip and Karbinici, as well as those all over Macedonia, through the "Agrocorner" web portal [www.Agrocorner.mk](http://www.Agrocorner.mk) and information set on the Library web site. ([www.nubgdst.edu.mk](http://www.nubgdst.edu.mk))

One of the project's outcome is an Agrocorner web portal that uploads articles about agriculture, farm produce and prices, suppliers and prices of agricultural equipment and other information according to the needs of the farmers in the region. The library also alerted farmers to new opportunities for grants and support through a mobile phone text messaging (SMS) service. The “*Agrocorner*” - *Web portal* with lots of information is now useful for the farmers although the project ends.

### ***Training farmers: challenges towards success***

The main beneficiaries of our project were the farmers all over Macedonia, especially farmers in 14 villages and 5 suburban districts of the municipalities of Shtip and Karbinci, where INFOBUS with Agricultural Corener placed inside, was traveling in 2012. This project provided professional and technical assistance for the rural population education programme and experience exchange. This way finances such as subsidies, credits and start-up credits for the stimulation of agro-business and self-employment, also IPARD funds from EU became accessible to all interested farmers. Our common goal was to make improvement of their social-economic status, capable of applying for funds provided by the Institutions from Macedonia and outside using information from Agrocorner Portal during and long after the project ends.

Training consisted of two parts: training of farmers to raise their level of education<sup>3</sup> related to farming, training for acquiring knowledge and skills in the application of ICT and the Internet. According to the activities plan, totally 30 trainings were held, where 28 trainings at the 4 villages: Chardaklija, Karbinci, Karaorman and Tarinci and 2 trainings along with Infobus during its visit to the villages Radanje and Argulica. The 7 presentations from the area of agriculture and livestock were defined by the shown needs of the farmers, which the presenters came to in the previous visits. The farmers attended seven presentations in the area of agriculture: Organic agricultural production and integrated protection of the plants - 49 people, Subsidies-use manual - 61 people, Presentation about how to lease the land - 61 people, Improved plant nutrition - improved income - 38 people, Subsidies for the programme of rural development - 36 people, Animal nutrition - livestock success - 50 people and Agricultural consult and using computers - 35 people. There was also training for basic computer skills, attended by 42 farmers divided in 4 groups (1 group in each of 4 villages). Consultations on agriculture and application of ICT was also held in Radanje and Argulica villages so, total 357 attendees for agricultural training during the project implementation were covered during implementation phase.

It was a real challenge to work with farmers in Shtip and Karbinci municipalities, to offer training, to determine the date and time suitable to the farmers. We saw that if the training were very frequent they feel pressured and that's why we go with training slowly taking into consideration their opinion about each challenge we faced. Several trainings were cancelled and scheduled for other terms.

The agricultural education was postponed due to the winter problems with access to the countryside during 2 months. The second period of implementation, spring and summer time, farmers were on their properties. We have tried several times to speak to come late at evening but at the end we all agree to delay training 'till the time it is most suitable for them.

That ICT training in 4 villages was finished successfully at the end of the year, and the individual consulting inside the Infobus that bring us possibilities to realize the project challenges and activities more efficiently.

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<sup>3</sup>URL: <http://www.eifl.net/library-wheels-helps-farmers-tackle-organic-farmin> [2013.05.05]

On the other side, seeing the benefit only in material form, money, equipment, we had to convince some of the librarians and community public for the fundamental role of libraries-serving our users the best as we can- “Library at will of the farmers”, bringing continuous new innovative services according to the needs of the community. Therefore, lobbying and advocacy was really necessary for the librarianship by all of us who have been engaged more in a different way and who know the real role of a community librarian. In this context, thanks to EIFL-PLIP (Public Library Innovation Program) that initialized and financially contribute the Regional Conference “Public libraries empower innovation in the community”<sup>4</sup> that really “awaked” the librarians and encourage them to fulfill the mission of their own library and community.

### ***Online information service: Creating of the web page [www.Agrocorner.mk](http://www.Agrocorner.mk)***

According to the considerations of the farmers (received through the informal conversation) there is always a need of providing information that will help their farming. Because of that there is a necessity for the creation of the “**Agrocorner**” Internet portal. That service was updated weekly and provided following information:

- professional articles about agriculture,
- news about subsidies and its application procedure and time
- news about any conducted project activity and announcement for them
- Information of agriculture products price through links from other webpage
- information about laws and regulative about the agriculture in Macedonia
- Information of suppliers and price of agriculture equipment, and
- All the information from the materials presented on workshops in the villages and inside INFOBUS by professionals from University and Agency.

The most visited contents on the page, till the end of year 2012, were: **About the project - 353 hits, Galery -336 hits, Practical advices - 309 hits, Documents- 256 hits.**

### ***Partnerships’ role for common impact***

There is a great contribution for the successful realization of the project by the partners who initially signed a memorandum of cooperation. They were in accordance with the established goals and objectives of the project, responsibly and consistently carried out their role with complete and continuous support and assistance throughout the complete project implementation. The project team along with 4 lecturers for agriculture and 1 for ICT training, mediate on aid in the process:

- 1) How to use subsidies of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management in Macedonia,
- 2) How to get information and guideline for applying for IPARD funds by EU,
- 3) How to have better communication among them and with local authorities and with the Regional Ministries,
- 4) How to use different training courses, platforms, lectures for their needs,
- 5) How to stimulate local initiative in order to improve quality of life.

The Library also gave available literature that helped farmers in improving their knowledge

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<sup>4</sup>URL:<http://www.zenskaakcija-radovis.mk/index.php/77-nastani/152-2013-02-18-12-50-39>  
[2013.05.05]

Partners in the project were **Shtip and Karbinici Municipalities**. These two municipalities represented by the directors of the primary municipal schools helped the project by providing a room, classroom for conducting training in local schools. Also any school has supplied technical staff as a contact person that assist in providing access to the classroom in terms scheduled training. Schools also provided their own technical resources, computers, LCD projector warming. Other support from the municipalities consists in providing the necessary information for agriculture in the four villages that were involved in the project by engaging employees in municipalities.

**Goce Delchev University " - Shtip** was also the project partner. This educational institution has supported the project by hiring a competent person from the Office of Rural Development, a trainer who realized the majority of expert lectures. The benefit of this cooperation is mutual. The project got the quality in the area of expert lectures, and the office was able to bring its services to villagers, farmers, before the possibility and the essential need for the application of agrochemical analysis of soil<sup>5</sup>.

The important partnership was also established with the **Citizen' Association "Synergy" - Shtip**. Trough collaboration with the NGO sector, once again has been proven the fact that active partnerships between institutions and NGOs lead to successful implementation of actions to address and overcome the problems and needs that are of interest to the different groups of the local community. NGO Synergy, represented by an assistant, responsibly conducted its obligations during the project implementation.

An active partnership between **Shtip Regional Office of the National Extension Agency** and the Library was one of the leading contributors during the implementation of the overall projects activities. Namely there was engaged a competent person to conduct lectures related to the presentation of programs of government subsidies and assistance to rural areas. Thus provide direct assistance to farmers in terms of completing applications for subsidy, and the usefulness of this collaboration is indicated by the fact the increased number of applications submitted for grants last year<sup>6</sup>.

### *New equipment and technologies bring benefits for the farmers*

Thanks to the project six lap top computers were purchased and there was Internet access installed in the Infobus, so the villagers from the 14 villages the Infobus visits could use the computers and the Internet too. It was paid subscription for 2 years from the project support activities. As grantees by EIFL-PLIP a donation was given in software for operating system and application programs for 10 computers worth of \$ 50,968 by Microsoft Cooperation<sup>7</sup>. New service is the web page that was made [www.agrpcorner.mk](http://www.agrpcorner.mk) which contains the presentations, useful links and materials that can help the farmers.

By implementing the project, the farmers changed their attitude about the Infobus. Once the main users of the Infobus were young and the students, but today we can easily say that one of the main priorities of the project has been accomplished and the Infobus - library on wheels is available for the needs of the farmers. They started to use the Internet more often, the agricultural expert literature, the expert magazines, leaflets and other printed materials, including the new web page. A positive thing is that the young pupils and students started to use the Internet in the Infobus also and participated in the basic computer skills training. The Regional Public and University Library Goce Delchev also benefits from this, by promoting its innovative services on local, national and world level which changes its

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<sup>5</sup>URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awdmZKcO5xE> [2013.05.05]

<sup>6</sup>URL: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRvn1RD2I\\_Q&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRvn1RD2I_Q&feature=youtu.be) [2013.05.05]

<sup>7</sup>URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEk5ascy3Bc> [2013.05.05]

image and its possibility to satisfy the needs of the members of the local community. Another one who benefits from the project is the GDU's Office of Rural Development by offering their services to the farmers. As a result the number of applications for agrochemical analysis has grown and it is used by villagers in the 4 villages, participants in the project. The Macedonian Government also benefits from this project because of its Agency for support and development of the through the statistics that shows the number of applications for grants has also grown, in comparison with the previous year. This contributed into fulfilling one of the primary goals of the Macedonian Government which is to stimulate and to help the farmers to get their agriculture to new level of development.

### ***Measurable outcomes***

We can see the success of this EIFL-PLIP project through the following outcomes.

- 30 trainings were held with seven thematic content in the field of agriculture with an overall attendance of 357 visitors
- Courses (4) of basic computer skills for 42 farmers divided in four groups/villages in the duration of 16 hours each course
- 6 individual and group training sessions held in Infobus by competent trainer
- More than 40 farmers from rural areas Shtip and Karbinici become regular users Infobus which means 100% increase the number of users / farmers (20 farmers in 2011, over 40 in 2012)
- More than 900 physical visits to Infobus in 2012 by farmers asking for services
- Established a web site [www.Agrocorner.mk](http://www.Agrocorner.mk) Most visited content of the site were: Project-353 hits, Galejina -336 hits, Practical Tips - 309 hits, Documents 256 hits.
- Purchase of 6 Laptops and Computer Accessories
- Provide 2 years subscription for the mobile Internet in Infobus
- Acquisition of more than 60 books, more than 60 copies of the magazine "Moja zemja" including 2 years subscription. (Some of the books in the library pertaining to crops, and donated to the project by the Government translation of 1000 titles from renowned universities, were put to service for the users/ farmers in the Infobus.)
- There were distributed over 400 pamphlets with advices separated from the teaching presentation of agriculture in the course during the project
- Over 500 text messages referring to information about grants and ongoing activities of the project were sent to farmers in the region.
- Project Promotion activities were over 14 (local and national)<sup>8</sup>
- 20% increase the number of the farmers applied for subsidies for crops, livestock and beekeeping. (In 2011 applied 2959 farmers, In 2012 applied 3700)

### ***Success Stories-lesson learnt***

In addition to the usefulness of the project, as examples of success stories there are statements of the participants in trainings, some of them were selected in this overall spot<sup>9</sup>. There was a farmer that said: "By participating in these training, I realized how important they are for us farmers, because we are still engaged in agriculture primitive way". The other one noticed: "Thanks to the training from this project where my husband and I participated, we learned that we can apply for subsidies for the maintenance of sour cherries, which grow a few years, and so far we were not aware of this information"

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<sup>8</sup>URL:[http://www.Agrocorner.mk/index.php?option=com\\_weblinks&view=category&id=13&Itemid=474](http://www.Agrocorner.mk/index.php?option=com_weblinks&view=category&id=13&Itemid=474)  
[2013.05.05]

<sup>9</sup> URL:<http://youtu.be/n5kVs0RRXHE> [2013.05.05]

Another example of a success story as a result of this project is cooperation with Goce Delchev University and the Office of Rural Development and in addition is a report from the engaged person in the project for the part of expert lectures on agriculture, Vasko Zlatkovski, MSc. He said: "Agriculture plays major role in providing income to rural families in Shtip & Karbinci municipality. Furthermore, it provides additional income for many urban families who are still having their ties with their properties. In order to increase producers' level of knowledge in growing crops and to prepare the farmers for approaching the common market topics were carefully selected so targeted goals would be reached .... I wish to address the necessity for extension of projects as this one has been. This time target should be focused on youth i.e. children at age of 10-13 years as they are the ones that would inherit the land and farming activities in the near future. And creating agents of change in agriculture is one of the most difficult tasks worldwide. If such project extension would be approved, more intensive program is a must and much more careful topics must be selected for adult education is much different than children's".

During implementation of the project there was a need for cooperation with the Shtip Regional Office of the National Extension Agency and director of the same institution fully endorsed the project and get involved in the implementation of the classes. Agency also hired its employees helped in providing information and data necessary for comparative analysis in terms of applications for subsidies last year and this, in both municipalities, and specifically for the four villages involved in the project. From the obtained results it can be concluded that the number of requests this year for grants has increased 20 % (In 2011 applied 2959 farmers, In 2012 applied 3700).

### ***Conclusion***

Success of the project depended mostly on established personal contacts with farmers and their confidence in the project team. Thus it was easier to explain and recognize the good project idea Infobus - Library of wheels to support farmers. This will ensure even more confidence and bringing the idea of the project and will also act motivating them to take action for changing their attitude towards the necessity and expediency of education. There should also be pursued contacts and meetings with farmers in the presence of their usual gatherings in villages in small groups. Another important aspect for the successful implementation is the alignment of the timeframe for implementation of activities with their free time, as well as when they have smaller scale of engagement. Experience from the implementation of the project showed that the most appropriate season is winter. During the project is perceived that farmers in Macedonia are still ruled by rigid attitudes toward the need for change and agricultural development and restructure according to modern standards. They still cannot see agriculture as a science, but prefer to work the way their fathers, grandfathers, and their ancestors worked. Present stereotypes regarding the cultivation of certain crops, which are not cost-effective in low yield and not justified from the point of view of agriculture as a science. It can also be concluded that in future education and the focus should be put on the young farmers who have different points of view and are willing to take steps to reform in agriculture. In terms of unemployment, they are registered farmers that see the future of possibility for development of lucrative agribusiness. For successful project implementation, and effective use of the services it offers, it is necessary to provide a fast internet connection. Site development and inclusion of the opportunity for free advertising of products farmers become the need of future implementation and sustainability.

Upon completion of financing by EIFL-PLIP, Public Library trough Infobus will continue active cooperation with established partners, and will continue collaboration with all successful farmers as well as will try to get in touch with others. It is planned to continue



organizing lectures and training on computers, together with local government. We will continue to update the library fund and Infobus will continue promote its innovative services as agricultural information and local community center.

This year, the Ministry of Culture Program, provide Infobus project to continue the trip through already established villages and frequency. The Ministry also provides a salary for the librarian and driver of the Infobus, and vehicle maintenance.

Because it is already equipped with agricultural literature and computers and of course the two-year subscription of internet allows to continue with providing the same service as well this year. Agricultural corner inside the Infobus remains as unique service to farmers in the region, and pamphlets from training and advice to farmers will again be copied in number according to the needs of the farmers. In the future we are planning more intensive cooperation with the local government in terms of financial support activities related to current needs and farmers.

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