Including libraries in development strategies

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Abstract

Governments, as well as development agencies and civil society organizations (CSOs), increasingly understand the potential of libraries to address their development goals. Libraries, on their part, progressively reach beyond their more "traditional" boundaries to establish partnerships that advance economic and social development. These partnerships show a promising trend in global librarianship and turn libraries into digitally advanced and inclusive development hubs. This paper explores this potential by following several development initiatives in Ukraine and Romania from 2009 to 2013. The Ukrainian government was the first government in the world to create an Open Government Partnership Action plan to recognize libraries as corner stones of the country's digital literacy program and e-government strategy. In Romania, the government created several successful partnerships with Romanian libraries and development agencies to address key development challenges. As this paper shows, libraries have great opportunities to work with governments and development agents to address these goals. At the same time, they face major challenges. Most public libraries around the world operate under the ministries responsible for culture or education, and are therefore driven towards those areas primarily by their line ministries and existing legislation. Many libraries also lack experience with partnerships outside the cultural and educational spheres, and development agents often do not think of libraries as relevant partners. This makes the development dialogue difficult to initiate. Additionally, at a time when ICT and development are increasingly connected, many public libraries do not have the technology and skilled staff necessary for libraries to become development hubs. And finally, libraries pay little attention to collecting and aggregating compelling national data about their impact that could be used in advocacy efforts.

Keywords: Libraries, Development, Open Government Partnership, Ukraine, Romania

1 INTRODUCTION

Governments, as well as development agencies and civil society organizations (CSOs), increasingly understand the potential of libraries to address their development goals. Today more than ever, human development is powered by access to and efficient use of information. For centuries, books have been major sources of information, but information and communication technologies (ICT), and the internet in particular, have accelerated the global information exchange and boosted the potential of this exchange to a new level.

With new opportunities come new challenges. While those with access to ICT have seen almost every aspect of their lives improve, those without ICT access or the necessary technical knowledge to use technology are falling behind, creating a phenomenon described as the digital divide. Libraries equipped with ICT that have the capacity to help citizens access, filter and use information are therefore increasingly seen as powerful agents for development, well beyond libraries' traditional focus areas of culture and education.

Libraries, increasingly reach beyond their more "traditional" boundaries to establish partnerships that advance economic and social development. These partnerships show a promising trend in global librarianship and turn libraries in the position of digitally advanced and inclusive development hubs.

This paper explores this potential by following several major development initiatives in Ukraine and Romania over the last five years. Through its Open Government Partnership Action Plan, the Ukrainian government was the first in the world to recognize libraries as corner stones of the country's digital literacy program and e-government strategy. In Romania, the government created several successful partnerships with Romanian libraries and development agencies to address some key development challenges such as unemployment and agricultural subsidies.

2 UKRAINE AND OPEN GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIP

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a global pledge by governments to be more transparent and accountable, and therefore more efficient in development. While commitments given by participating countries vary, most take advantage of the power of the internet when formulating their Action Plans. Ukraine joined the movement in 2011 at the time when the government was updating its e-government strategy. The Ukrainian 2012 Action Plan commits to placing many government services online and opening data portals and online tools for government-citizen interaction. It was developed in cooperation with local CSOs, international NGOs and the UNDP.

During the planning process, all stakeholders recognized the disconnect between placing a number of services and information online and low internet penetration in Ukraine, which excludes most from benefiting. According to Internet World Stats, internet penetration in Ukraine was 34,1% in 2012.[1] Additionally, many who have internet access are not confident users and use the internet for only basic functionalities.

The vast public library infrastructure in Ukraine was identified as a suitable venue to provide internet access and assistance with internet use. Public libraries can be found in almost every

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[1] See http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm

settlement in Ukraine, as there are 18,000 public libraries serving the country's population of 45 million. According to public opinion polls, librarians are among the most trusted members of their communities, together with teachers. The libraries are usually centrally located, free of charge for everyone and sustainably funded.

Traditionally centres for culture and reading, Ukrainian libraries became central to the government's strategy of bridging the digital divide and increasing access to e-government resources and tools. The section of the Action Plan that plans out the role of libraries is called *Organization and implementation of the initiative 'Public Libraries as Bridges to E-Governance*.' The Action Plan was approved by the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers in 2012. As a follow-up, the Ukrainian Minister of Culture issued a decree that formally approves the libraries' participation in the OGP initiative and sets a timeline for its implementation. Ukraine became the first country in the world to acknowledge the central importance of libraries to the OGP Action Plan and to e-government policy in general.

At the national level, the OGP Action Plan was a logical continuation of the on-going modernization of public libraries. Since 2009, the Ministry of Culture, together with Ukrainian Library Association (ULA) and International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), have been implementing a program to introduce the internet as a library service in Ukrainian's public libraries. As of May 2013, more than 2,000 libraries provide internet access and the assistance of skilled librarians. According to the IREX country office, less than 100 of the country's 490 raions (small administrative units usually containing small towns and neighboring villages) still do not have a library that provides free access to the internet. Librarians from those libraries have undergone a 3-week course that helps them become online information guides.

At the regional level, local authorities, local CSOs, and libraries coordinate the following activities dedicated to building e-government access infrastructure:

- Analysis of available resources and e-governance tools on both local and national levels;
- Creation of training modules on e-governance for librarians, government officials and the general population. The modules cover the theory of e-governance and most existing e-services and e-tools for communication with governments and elected officials;
- Training librarians, governmental officials, NGOs, journalists, and library patrons to use e-government tools and services. The trainings are carried out by two co-trainers in the public library: one librarian and one representative of a local NGO focused on e-governance.
- A contest for the best library e-governance services.
- An E-Governance Conference with a panel on engaging citizens through public libraries;
- Information campaigns to raise citizen awareness of the available tools and services and promoting their use through public libraries. The information campaigns usually include distribution of printed materials, videos and press conferences.

As with modernization of Ukrainian libraries at the national level, the concept of bringing e-governance services to public libraries was not entirely new in 2012. In December 2011, a survey of public libraries providing internet access in Ukraine showed that e-government services were popular, especially in the areas of pension eligibility, human rights and local government services.[2] These services and public internet access, nevertheless, were provided by a very small fraction of libraries at that time.

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[2] For reference to the presentation see http://academic-conferences.org/pdfs/ECEG12-book-vol2.pdf

Despite the fact that neither public internet access nor assistance with e-government resources was entirely new to Ukrainian libraries, the OGP Action Plan was groundbreaking for three principal reasons. First, the Ministry of Culture officially mandated that libraries provide services in an essentially non-cultural and non-educational sector. Providing access to internet, assisting patrons ICT work, and helping access e-government services and tools became officially part of core library service.

Second, libraries established themselves with local authorities as active and relevant players in e-governance. At least 52 trainings for different public officials happened in libraries in May-July 2013 only. Trained officials were village heads, representatives of departments of internal policy, departments of culture and departments for public relations and access to information. Also, 26 roundtables focused on regional e-governance took place in May-July 2013 in a cooperative effort between libraries, local NGOs and local governments.

Many libraries have carried out additional activities to promote e-governance in 2013 that go beyond the Minister's decree mentioned above. For example:

- Several libraries in Mykolaiv advised their local authorities on placing more e-services on their websites.
- Zakarpatia Oblast Universal Scientific Library (OUSL) organized a car race through major oblast cities as well as flash mobs dedicated to promoting e-governance.
- Kirovohrad OUSL and the oblast-level Ukrainian Library Association branch created a thematic listserv for public officials to disseminate information on e-governance, share best practices, and inform the public about project implementation.
- Volyn OUSL organized a coordination meeting on e-reporting jointly with the oblast departments of tax administration, pension fund, and statistics. The same library also held a Skype conference called "Government-Library-Community" for oblast officials and librarians.
- Khmelnytsky OUSL established a legal consulting centre jointly with judicial department of oblast administration and local human rights NGO.

Thirdly, public library outreach efforts have changed the public perception of libraries. Not long after libraries introduced public internet access and ICT assistance services, new groups of users have started to use the public library. For example, in 2012, the Ukrainian government finally launched an initiative to reimburse those who lost their savings in the USSR pension fund during the transition in 1990s. While most of those beneficiaries are today senior citizens, the registration can only be done online. Between April and December 2012 only, almost 10,000 senior library patrons obtained internet access and help from librarians to register in the Oshchadbank online system for reimbursement of their savings.

3 PARTNERING FOR DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA

In Romania, the National Association of Public Libraries and librarians (ANBPR), government line ministries, private sector, civil society partners, and IREX are implementing the Bill & Melinda Gates-funded Biblionet program. The program's main objective is to facilitate free access to computers and the internet for library patrons. Large segments of Romanian population do not have internet access, particularly in rural areas. Through the program, more than 2,000 public libraries have received computers for public internet access and more than 3,500 librarians have been trained in technology use. Currently, Biblionet is

working in 70 per cent of Romania's public libraries and over 93 per cent of libraries participating in the program are located in communities with fewer than 7,250 inhabitants.

Since Romania's entry into the EU, the country has demonstrated its incapacity to absorb a significant percentage of the funding offered through the EU multi-annual budget between 2007 and 2013. In an attempt to combat this issue, in March of 2013, the Ministry of Education, through the National Agency for Community Programs in Education and Professional Development (ANPCDEFP), partnered with 41 public library training facilities, located in each of the country's county libraries, and co-invested in a national training program to teach librarians the application process for accessing European funding. The ANPCDEFP has contributed a total of 36,700 USD while IREX an additional 34,525 USD to train 85 librarians in proposal writing and project management skills. The selected librarians will assist public libraries throughout the country apply for and absorb a greater proportion of EU funding opportunities. In this example librarians are focusing on EU-wide as well as Romanian priorities for the development and enhancement of non-formal and informal learning and training opportunities for the public. This partnership underscores how libraries are placing themselves in key positions to implement national and multi-national development goals.

Another serious development issue in Romania is unemployment. Unemployment rates have increased in almost all EU countries including Romania. Youth unemployment rates in Romania are now estimated at roughly 22 per cent. Understanding such trends is crucial when public libraries assess the varieties of assistance services for the public benefit. Such services not only empower individuals with much needed skills and information but concurrently align libraries with greater policy priorities of national or transnational governments, further underscoring their vital role in development. Often in Romania there is a disconnect between the job seeker and the employment opportunity, mainly reflecting the lack of digital readiness of the unemployed. In an effort to provide Romanians with a vital set of skills for seeking, applying, and interviewing for new employment opportunities, public libraries have created continuous services marketed in communities across the country that address those needs. Throughout the past twelve months 78,000 Romanians sought job seeking assistance from a public library, 28,500 applied for employment, and 9,000 successfully secured employment.

Another example of the role libraries in Romania play in development is their involvement in the agricultural subsidies. The Ministry of Agriculture through the Agency for Payments and Interventions in Agriculture (APIA) partnered with the ANBPR and IREX to provide farmers direct assistance in applying online for farm subsidies through their local public library. The partnership, over two years, has enabled in excess of 90,000 Romanian farmers to successfully apply and receive over 100 million Euros worth of farm subsidies. The partnership also resulted in saving farmers approximately 150,000 working days they would have needed if they were to have applied at their county capital, as they had done in the past. Besides the time savings, applying for farm subsidies in public libraries generated a total savings in gasoline of over 500,000 Euros. This partnership demonstrated that libraries, if included in the dialogue, are uniquely positioned to efficiently serve the government's development goals, saving the public greater financial resources while increasing productivity.

The above mentioned partnership between the government agency and public libraries focused on two main areas of convergence. Initially, both partners were concerned with

helping people understand how and where to access the application system, and later in what manner to assist farmers, with little to no digital literacy, manoeuvre through the online application platform and ultimately receive their farm subsidy. In the first phase, librarians from throughout the country went to their county capitals where they received training from APIA representatives about the online application system. Later, the group of initially trained public librarians, together with their local government representatives, marketed the service locally and informed families in each community that they could apply for their farm subsidies through their local public library. The second stage was to assist the farmers apply for their subsidy. This component was approached in two manners, either the librarians provided direct assistance to the farmer, or they were able to schedule specific days when an APIA representative could provide direct assistance in their library.

4 CHALLENGES TO LIBRARIES BECOMING HUBS FOR TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

As the above examples show, there are great opportunities for libraries to work with governments and development agents on addressing development goals. At the same time, the concept of a library as a technologically advanced development hub meets many challenges. The authors of this paper have grouped the challenges observed (mostly) in Ukraine and Romania into five broad categories.

The first challenge is that most public libraries around the world operate under the ministries responsible for culture or education, and therefore are driven towards those areas primarily by their line ministries and existing legislation. Their mission and scope of work is defined in the context of the line ministry's authority. Therefore the involvement of libraries outside the traditional responsibilities of the line ministry (such as e-governance in Ukraine or agriculture in Romania) requires establishing relationships with agencies responsible for those areas (National Agency for Science, Innovation, and Informatization in Ukraine, or the Ministry of Agriculture in Romania). Significant political will is needed on both sides to extend the traditional scope of library work.

The second challenge is that at the time when ICT and development are increasingly connected, librarians often lack the technologies and technical skills to become ICT information guides. Experience from Ukraine and Romania shows that while ICT trainings improve library staff ICT capacity, the level of knowledge and capability to assist patrons in a wide range of areas remains lower than desired. While technology is increasingly present in libraries, the pace of equipping them is slow. At the present time, libraries are more often at the tail than on the forefront of the technological revolution.

The third challenge is that many libraries lack experience with partnerships out of the cultural and educational spheres. Similarly, many development agents do not think about a public library as suitable information infrastructure for development initiatives. This makes the development dialogue hard to start. This challenge is related as much to public perception of a library, as to self-perceptions of librarians themselves.

The fourth challenge is that librarians often concentrate their service development in relation to the needs of their local communities without considering the greater impact of their efforts when aggregated with the efforts of other librarians. Those accumulated results are often the most important demonstrations of public library impact in key domains that interest and could potentially influence public policy makers. Without a strong umbrella formation or

grouping to coordinate such efforts, libraries will continue to struggle in their efforts to demonstrate strategic development value to governments and funders.

And finally, in developing countries public libraries often compete for very limited financial resources. Local and national governments are often faced with difficult decisions that require them to either invest in basic infrastructure and education projects or in the public library, even if the medium term social and economic benefits from a public library investment supersede their other choices. Without compelling data, including important impact and qualitative information, public libraries will never gain the competitive advantage over competing priorities.

4 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors of this paper offer several recommendations for how the above mentioned challenges can be overcome or mitigated.

On the national level, there should be a government platform for discussing and maximizing the potential of libraries in development. Just like many governments establish cross-sectoral bodies and committees to promote a certain strategy or agenda (technology, gender), there could be a body whose aim is to incorporate libraries in all development initiatives requiring informational infrastructure. Alternatively, an advisory council with representatives of line ministry responsible for libraries, national library association and potentially the national library, could serve as a recommending body for inclusion of libraries into development strategies. Such body would need to have access to the cabinet of ministers and to hearings in the legislative bodies.

The deficiencies in capacity of librarians to be technological/informational guides need to be corrected by increased training of librarians in technology. There needs to be a minimum standard requirement in computer literacy among librarians, comparable to European Computer Drivers Licence (ECDL). Not all librarians would need to have this qualification, but those who interact with patrons as reference librarians/technology advisers should have an above-average knowledge of technology, as well as knowledge of electronic sources of information.

Successful partnerships between libraries and other development agents, still rather rare, should be well promoted and publicized in the interest of raising public awareness (including among librarians) about the concept and potential of a modern library.

National library associations should adjust their priorities away from their current focus on national statistics towards capturing and illustrating the greater societal benefits produced by libraries. With the direct support from organizations such as IFLA and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation library associations are receiving increased assistance for institutional capacity building that can enable them to become national advocacy leaders. International conferences must also focus more time and attention towards this topic so as to increase the visibility of the importance that national associations play in the future development of the public library sphere as a whole.

Difficulties in securing annual budget needs are a concern for all public library systems, whether in the US, Namibia, the Netherlands, or South Korea. Limited resources and competing policy interests will continue to challenge public librarians, and demand they better articulate their budgetary needs and clearly illustrate how those numbers will reflect in

improving the community as well as individual lives. Greater emphasis must be placed in assisting public librarians to understand how to prepare for the changing realities they will continue to face.