

Small services big impact: public libraries' contribution to urban and rural development

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Abstract:

The economic downturn and the failure of large industry and the manufacturing sector to keep up with employment needs has led to a greater emphasis on economic development strategies focused on local entrepreneurship and self-employment. In this environment, as local, trusted institutions, close to their communities and sensitive to local issues, public libraries have an important role to play.

Since 2010, the EIFL (<http://www.eifl.net>) Public Library Innovation Programme (EIFL-PLIP) has supported 49 new and innovative services in 27 developing and transition economy countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. This paper explores the ways in which public libraries are contributing to the economic wellbeing of individuals and communities in different urban and rural settings.

In urban areas, public library services supported by EIFL-PLIP have primarily targeted the unemployed. We discuss services offered by Lyuben Karavelov Regional Library (Bulgaria), which targets long-term unemployed people aged over 40; Public Library 'Braka Miladinovci' Radovis (Macedonia), which works with unemployed young women, and Masiphumelele Public Library (South Africa), which serves an impoverished peri-urban slum, and whose service aimed to place vulnerable youth on positive career paths.

In rural areas, economic improvement services supported by have mostly targeted farmers. We discuss the services of Public Library 'Radislav Nikcevic' (Serbia), whose AgroLib online market enables farmers to share information about farming methods and to market their produce; Regional public and university library Goce Delchev-Stip (Macedonia), which helps farmers find information about subsidies and apply for grants online, and Pasvalys 'Marius Katiliskis' Public Library (Lithuania), which offers farmers ICT training, a web-portal and a desktop publishing centre.

Many economic studies have been done to show how libraries contribute to local development, but in essence these studies are based on calculating the value of traditional library services, such as book lending. Our paper suggests a different research methodology through which libraries can measure

their contribution to economic growth in their communities. The methodology produces both quantitative and qualitative results and can be applied by small, resource constrained libraries.

Keywords: EIFL library community development agriculture employment

Introduction

The financial crisis of 2007/8 and the subsequent economic downturn have led to concerns about possible reversals in poverty reduction and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The World Development Report (World Bank, 2013) puts global unemployment at 200 million, including 75 million young people aged below 25. Despite rapid urbanization in developing countries, some 3.1 billion people, or 55% of the total population, live in rural areas. The economic crisis has led to a new focus on jobs and entrepreneurship as economic development strategies, and in rural areas, improved farming methods and creation of well-functioning agricultural markets (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2010).

In this paper, we explore the role of public library responses to the crisis, and the ways in which they are supporting local and national economic development strategies. We do this by sharing experiences from the EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) Public Library Innovation Programme (EIFL-PLIP), which supports public libraries in developing and transition economy countries to use information and communication technology (ICT) to initiate innovative public library services that improve lives. We explore a particular model of service development that has grown out of the EIFL-PLIP experience.

The global economic crisis has led to austerity programmes and budget cuts that are profoundly impacting public libraries everywhere. In this climate, it has become imperative for libraries to provide credible evidence of their value. There have been several economic studies to show how libraries contribute to development, but these studies are generally based on calculating the value of traditional library services, such as book lending (Missingham, 2005). Our paper suggests a different research methodology that produces quantitative and qualitative results, and which can be applied by small libraries with limited budgets.

EIFL-PLIP services contributing to urban and rural economic wellbeing

Since 2009, EIFL-PLIP has provided small grants¹ and capacity building support for development of 49 new and innovative public library services in developing and transition economy countries that use ICT to contribute to community development. The services are being delivered through over 300 public libraries and their branches in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. Services issue areas include agriculture, employment, health, youth development and social inclusion, and serve small geographic communities or communities of interest (for example, people with an interest in employment). The majority (29) of the 49 services initiated with EIFL-PLIP aim to improve economic wellbeing as a core goal; the balance have broader social goals².

¹ Grants generally range from about US\$15,000 to US\$30,000 for each library project.

² For a full list of EIFL-PLIP grantees, visit: <http://www.eifl.net/our-current-grantees>. To read short impact studies, visit: <http://www.eifl.net/plip-impact>

Social and economic wellbeing are fundamentally linked, and so in the broadest sense, all the services initiated with support from EIFL-PLIP contribute to community economic wellbeing. For example, the Ghana Library Authority's 'Technology for Maternal Health' service in northern Ghana, which aims to reduce maternal mortality through provision of information to health-workers and pregnant women³, potentially reduces the costs of ill health to individuals, families and the health system. Similarly, library ICT services supporting children's education, like A&M Miskiniai Public Library's 'Play to Study' service in Utena, Lithuania, which reconnects children who are reluctant to attend school and study with the school system⁴, may save families, communities and the state the costs attached to high school drop-out rates.

However, studies that cost, or prove the economic value, of libraries' social contribution are rare, and where they do exist, are mostly available for bigger libraries (Arts Council England 2014). Small libraries serving local communities struggle to prove the economic value of their contribution, and are therefore not considered important players in local economy.

The EIFL-PLIP service development model

Over the past four years, EIFL-PLIP has developed a model for initiating innovative public library services that use ICT to contribute to community development (see Diagramme 1: The EIFL-PLIP service development model). This model now forms the basis of our grant-making and capacity building for service innovation activities. It is built around four guiding principles:

Services must address real and known community needs:

Grant applicants are required to conduct research to establish the need for the service and to identify an appropriate solution. The application process does not stipulate what kind of research is required, but encourages presentation of quantitative and qualitative information to support the proposal. Grant applicants have used many different strategies to establish community needs, including desk research, consultation with local stakeholders, focus groups and community surveys.

Technology must be appropriate to the community and the context:

EIFL-PLIP supports any ICT that is affordable, can be used by the target community, and will work in the geographic context. For example, mobile services are encouraged to use laptop, notebook or tablet computers; in places where there is no electricity, alternatives like solar power are considered; where internet connections are unreliable, applicants may consider pre-loading computers with information. EIFL-PLIP does not place limits on the kind of ICT libraries may integrate into their projects, and services supported hardware and software including desktop, laptop and tablet computers, mobile phones, digital video and voice recorders, cameras, projectors, proprietary and open source software and social media tools.

Partnerships support, strengthen and sustain services:

Small public libraries, offering services that go beyond the traditional role of libraries, need the support of partners to plan, implement and sustain their services. Applicants must identify

³ For more information about this project, visit: <http://www.eifl.net/ghana-library-board-northern-regional-library#node-2670>

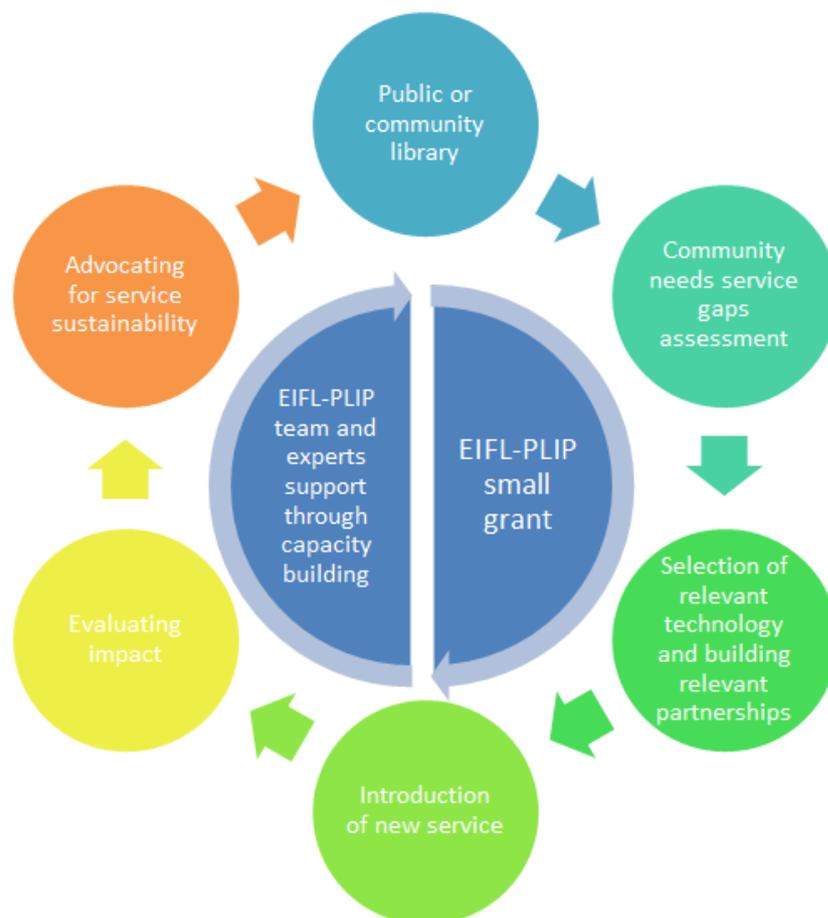
⁴ For more information about this project, visit: <http://www.eifl.net/utena-and-m-miskiniai-public-library-lithuania>

local partners, explain the choice of partner and provide evidence of partner support (for example, a letter from the partner confirming involvement). Library partners include government agencies, NGOs, municipalities, universities, businesses, and technology companies.

Credible evidence of service impact is fundamental to future sustainability:

EIFL-PLIP-supported services are expected to assess the impact of their innovative services, and to use results to advocate for further support for their services. To this end, EIFL-PLIP builds librarians' impact assessment capacity at the outset of projects, and provides mentoring throughout grant contract period. EIFL-PLIP also builds librarians' advocacy capacity. In preparing advocacy strategies, libraries are encouraged to highlight evidence of how they contribute to development needs not generally perceived to be within libraries' remit (health, agriculture, employment) and to make sure they include government ministries that deal with these issues in advocacy activities.

Diagramme 1: The EIFL-PLIP service development model



Supporting employment: public libraries' contribution to economic wellbeing in urban areas

In urban areas, services initiated with EIFL-PLIP support have primarily targeted the unemployed. They respond to a global challenge: ICTs have revolutionized the workplace, presenting exciting opportunities, but requiring skills. According to European Commission research, by 2015, 90% of jobs in Europe will need e-skills. In developing countries,

companies and institutions are also increasingly digitizing their operations, but the vast majority of people cannot afford computers, connections or training (Pew Research Centre, 2014). The EIFL-PLIP services all combine ICT skills training, employment information, support for job-searching activities, and job application skills, careers counselling and motivation. Some have created websites where job-seekers can advertise their skills and employers can advertise jobs.

Lyuben Karavelov Regional Library, Bulgaria

In the town of Ruse, Bulgaria's fifth largest city (population about 150,000) Lyuben Karavelov Regional Library offers an employment support and information service for long-term unemployed people aged over 40. To identify the need, the librarians used a combination of statistics, observation and community research. In 2010 the Ruse Labour Office Directorate estimated that a third of unemployed (over 4,500 people) were aged over 40, and of these over 3,000 were long-term unemployed. Between 2009 and 2011, librarians recorded a 70% increase in the number of people coming to use the library's computers, the majority to write CVs or look for jobs. Librarians received frequent requests for technical support from older library users, and a library survey found that most unemployed people aged between 40 and 60 believed they were unemployed because they did not have computer skills and could not afford training⁵.

The library's service, titled Knowledge for Opportunities for Work (KNOW), tackles the problem on four levels: (1) ICT training; (2) job-seeking training (applying online; writing a CV; interview preparation); (3) access to employment information (the library created a web-portal with links to employment information and support agencies⁶); (4) motivation and counselling to build job-seekers' confidence and encourage entry into the job market. Partner organizations helped market the service, identify and screen trainees and provided employment information.

A pro-active marketing campaign (over 250 mentions in library and national and local mass media) attracted 150 applicants for training, and in less than a year (2011/12), the library trained 68 people (47 women and 21 men). The majority of trainees underwent the full course: ICT, job-seeking skills and motivation.

The library's impact assessment produced positive results. A survey of trainees found that 60 had never used the library before; all improved their ICT skills and all believed that the training would help them get a job. In short interviews, most trainees said that the training had increased their confidence in the job market. Over half of the trainees (44 people) found jobs. A library awareness-raising and advocacy campaign won recognition from Ruse municipality, which adjusted the library budget to accommodate KNOW. The municipality has also provided additional support to extend the library's ICT training to the elderly, women and child victims of violence, orphaned children and members of minority groups. The library also has a formal partnership with the local Labour Office Directorate to continue the KNOW training programme for long-term unemployed people aged over 40⁷.

Public Library Braka Miladinovci, Macedonia

⁵ Information is taken from Lyuben Karavelov Regional Library's application for a grant, October, 2011.

⁶ KNOW employment website, URL: <http://www.znam.libruse.bg/index.html>

⁷ Survey, service impact and advocacy outcomes information is taken from Lyuben Karavelov Regional Library's final report and impact assessment results, November 2012.

The library serves the municipalities of Radovis and Konce in eastern Macedonia. To establish the community need, Public Library Braka Miladinovci used a combination of municipal statistics and a community survey. In 2009, the municipal labour bureau estimated that one in five people in Radovis and Konce was unemployed. Of these, 38% were women, the majority aged between 20 and 40. Librarians surveyed unemployed library members aged from 18 to 40, and found that lack of basic computer skills and money for training were most often given as reasons for failure to find work. In addition, based on their observations and knowledge of the local context, librarians believed that school education did not encourage an innovative, entrepreneurial approach, and so job-seekers lacked motivation and did not know how to market their skills and potential to employers⁸.

To address these problems, the library introduced 'Creative Minds Create Job Opportunities', a service that includes ICT training, job-seeking and job-application skills, motivation and counselling. In partnership with local non-governmental organizations and the municipality, the library created a website⁹ where job-seekers can post CVs and advertise their skills and where employers can advertise jobs.

In just over a year (2009/10), the library worked with 82 job-seekers, 38 of whom found work. Numbers of library users rose sharply (by 74%) in the same period, and the number of unemployed library users increased by 176% - from 60 a week before the new service was introduced to 166 after one year. The service won an international award from the international ERSTE Foundation for contribution to social integration, and prize money was used to expand the service and extend it to other marginalized groups. A successful advocacy strategy led both local municipalities (Radovis and Konce) to make funding libraries a priority. When Konce municipality received a grant from the European Union for a new building, they included space for a library¹⁰.

In 2012, two years after the end of the EIFL-PLIP project period, Public Library Braka Miladinovci again assessed the impact of the service. A survey of unemployed service users demonstrated several positive outcomes in relation to community economic wellbeing. Over 70% of respondents said their primary access to computers and the internet was the library, and 41% were first-time internet users. Respondents rated the library's internet service 'highly positive' in with respect to sending / receiving money to / from family (44%); financial savings (60%); finding work (63%) and generating income (42%); time saving (54%), and obtaining access to central and government services (38%). An overwhelming majority of those who used the service found information about employment on the internet (80%) and used the information to apply for a job (89%)¹¹.

The service also attracted a financial contribution for training and library infrastructure from Buchim Copper mine, one of the biggest employers in the area, and in exchange, the library provided free membership for 500 Buchim workers¹².

⁸ Information is taken from Public Library Braka Miladinovci's application for a grant, February 2010.

⁹ At the time of writing this paper, Public Library Braka Miladinovci's info-point for jobseekers (<http://bibliotekaradovis-infopoint.mk>) could not be accessed.

¹⁰ Information about project results is taken from Public Library Braka Miladinovci's final report and case study, August 2011.

¹¹ Results are taken from the Public Library Braka Miladinovci's report, April 2012.

¹² Information is taken from Public Library Braka Miladinovci's impact assessment report, April 2012.

Masiphumelele Public Library, South Africa

The library's ICT training and employment information programme serves youth in an impoverished peri-urban slum near CapeTown, where unemployment is extremely high, especially among youth. The library drew on statistics about internet access in South Africa (in 2008, just under 11% of people were accessing the internet); local knowledge and observation: there was no other public free or paid computer access in the settlement; in 2011 the library had only 11 computers. Desperate to learn, youth were sitting three-deep to a computer¹³.

With EIFL-PLIP support, the library upgraded their computer laboratory to include additional computers and a wi-fi internet connection. Masiphumelele Public Library's service is slightly broader than the other two urban libraries described in this paper, in that it focuses on careers rather than jobs. Training aims to place vulnerable youth on positive career paths, and includes ICT skills, life skills and careers counselling, writing CVs and support for online searches for study and work opportunities. Careers counselling and job-seeking training are provided in partnership with a local non-governmental youth development organization, Ikamva Youth, with which the library has a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship, cross-referring service users and clients and sharing premises, computers and the wi-fi internet connection.

In less than a year, the library trained 1,540 beginners and 48 intermediate ICT students; and referred 35 young people to job-seeking and career-focused training. At the end of training, trainees receive a certificate stating their level of computer skills (basic, intermediate, advanced) which they attach to their CVs. Twenty service users found jobs and 31 entered further education. Library users interviewed as part of the library's impact assessment research were extremely positive about the service: "This library has changed my life because I am learning and I will get a certificate instead of just sitting home doing nothing," Sikhumbuzo Tsobo told the library. "Now I have my own email address, I surf for jobs and careers for myself and friends. The computer classes are the best - I've gained a lot," said Noxolo Memke¹⁴.

Supporting farmers: public libraries' contribution to economic wellbeing in rural areas

In rural areas, EIFL-PLIP-supported services primarily target farmers and farming communities. Because farmers live far apart, and work long hours, the services either work through rural branch libraries or use mobile libraries equipped with computers and the internet to travel to villages and farms. Services include ICT training, agricultural web-portals, online farm produce markets and educational events (lectures, webinars) where farmers can meet experts and learn about new agricultural methods.

Public Library 'Radislav Nikčević', Serbia

The library is located in Jagodina, the administrative centre of central Serbia. A library survey at the start of the project found that people in villages were poor and wanted to modernize agricultural production and increase their income. The survey found that there

¹³ Information is taken from Masiphumelele library's grant application, October 2011.

¹⁴ Service user testimonials and information about results of Masiphumelele Public Library's ICT training and careers support service are taken from the library's final and impact assessment reports, November 2012.

were some successful, innovative farmers; however, there was no organized way to exchange knowledge, information and experience. In four villages (Glavinci, Glogovac, Bagrdan and Bunar, there were libraries that had fallen into disuse as a result of war and economic recession. To fulfil farmers' information needs, the library proposed revitalizing the village libraries by equipping them with computers, connecting them to the internet, increasing their stocks of books and journals on agriculture, and deploying librarians to work there¹⁵.

The AgroLib-Ja service includes free ICT access and skills training for farmers; a web-portal with links to farm support agencies and agricultural information, and a popular online farm produce market¹⁶; increased stocks of books and articles about agriculture, and public lectures by agricultural experts from government farm support agencies, technical colleges and universities. Partners include the local municipality, which provided funds to renovate the libraries and now employs village librarians; the Rural Development Support Network, which provides agricultural expertise and information about farm subsidies, and the Agency for Small and Medium Enterprises and Registered Agricultural Households which supports the libraries' programme of educational events.

Farmers flocked to the libraries. In one year (2010/11) librarians recorded 1,175 visits by farmers to use the internet; 1,249 visits to hear lectures; 1,655 visits to use agricultural literature, and 6,158 hits on the AgroLib website. The number of visitors to the village libraries rose from 16 a week before AgroLib-Ja to 176 a week at the end of the project's first year. Farmers' perceptions of the service were overwhelmingly positive: 'On the very first day that I opened a profile on the AgroLib market, I managed to sell part of my crop – 1,500kg of quince! Through the contacts I think I will easily sell out the entire crop next time!' Mr Zoran Milosevic, who owns a small quince orchard, told the library¹⁷.

In 2012, the library conducted a survey to assess the impact of the service. The majority of farmers surveyed said they used the service to look for agricultural information. Over 70% said information provided through the service had helped them increase production, and 50% said the information had helped increase produce sales¹⁸.

Inspired by the success of the service, villagers from Glavinci in central Serbia organized a petition to demand high-speed internet for the whole village. It worked – and now over 4,500 people from Glavinci and two nearby villages have access to high speed wireless Internet in their homes and in their village library.

In 2013, the AgroLib-Ja service won an ERSTE Foundation award for Social Integration. The library is also currently working with the local governments of Kragujevac, Vranje, Rekovac, Aleksinac and Jagodina and Serbian Ministry of Culture and Information on a project titled Agricultural Libraries in Serbia. If supported, the project will extend the AgroLib model of

¹⁵ Information is taken from Public Library 'Radislav Nikčević's' application to EIFL for grant support, 2010.

¹⁶ Public Library 'Radislav Nikčević's' AgroLib website and online market, URL: <http://www.agrolib.rs/pijaca/en>

¹⁷ Information is taken from Public Library 'Radislav Nikčević's' final report and case study, August 2011.

¹⁸ Information is taken from Public Library 'Radislav Nikčević's' impact assessment report, April 2012.

agricultural services to village libraries in these areas. The extension plan is also supported by the international non-governmental library support agency, Beyond Access¹⁹.

Regional public and university library ‘Goce Delcev’ – Stip, Macedonia

This library service, titled ‘Library on wheels – library at the will of the farmers’, serves farmers in four villages near Stip in eastern Macedonia. The villages do not have libraries, and are served by the library’s mobile service.

Community need was expressed in relation to the national and local economic context. Macedonia is in the process of acquiring full membership of the EU) and had recently received the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD) funding. IPARD includes funding to promote sustainable agriculture, to modernize farming, to make farming more competitive and to prepare farmers to comply with EU regulations. From 2007 – 2013, the government made €120 million (about US\$164 million) available for agricultural subsidies. But accessing funding was complex, and increasingly, farmers were expected to apply for grants online. Many farmers did not know how to apply and did not have internet access or skills²⁰.

Using their INFOBUS mobile library, librarians travel to villages that do not have libraries, bringing laptop computers and wi-fi internet, and books and journals on agriculture. Using local schools as venues, the library provides ICT training and organizes events at which government and other agricultural experts present information about new farming methods and agricultural subsidies²¹.

In less than a year (2011/12), working with the government farm support agency and university-based experts, librarians organized 30 seminars attracting 357 participants. They provided individual guidance for 145 farmers to apply for grants, and trained 42 farmers to use ICT. According to the municipalities of Stip and Karbinici, 20% more farmers applied for agricultural production grants in 2012. Municipal officials attributed the increase to the library’s service²².

Pasvalys ‘Marius Katiliskis’ Public Library, Lithuania

The library’s Libr-A service, working through a network of 34 rural libraries, has a stronger focus on enterprise development than the other two rural services described in this paper. To establish the farmers’ needs, librarians at ‘Marius Katiliskis’ Public Library surveyed rural librarians working in the local network of 34 rural libraries. They also surveyed farmers and their families; members and leaders of farmers’ organizations and consulted agricultural officials from Pasvalys district municipality. The key findings were that, although there were several streams of information for farmers, these were unsystematic and repetitive; also, there

¹⁹ For more information, visit Public Library Jagodina and AgroLib-Ja blog: Agricultural Libraries in Serbia, posted by Jagodina Public Library, March 20, 2014. URL: <http://jagodinalibrary.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/agricultural-libraries-in-jagodina.html>

²⁰ Information is taken from Regional public and university library ‘Goce Delcev’ – Stip’s application to EIFL for a grant, October 2011.

²¹ The library also developed a website for farmers – Agrokornar – but at the time of writing this paper, the website had been suspended.

²² Information is taken from Regional public and university library ‘Goce Delcev’ – Stip’s final and impact assessment reports, November 2012 – January 2013.

was no space for farmers' to advertise their products online. Farmers had access to ICT, and used computers, the internet and smart phones. However, they were not using smart phones to their full capacity²³.

Launched in November 2011, Libr-A reaches farmers through the rural libraries' network. The service includes free access to ICT and ICT training; an agricultural web-portal with news and information about the weather, markets, opportunities for farmers, farming methods, links to farm support agencies and free advertising space for farm produce²⁴, and a desktop publishing centre where librarians help farmers design marketing leaflets and business cards.

In less than a year (2011/12), the library trained over 120 farmers, entrepreneurs and rural librarians to use ICT, worked with farmers to publish 600 leaflets and 200 product labels, and attracted 68 advertisements to the web-portal. The library established strong partnerships with farmers' associations, local business, media and the Pasvalys Municipality. The municipality was so impressed by Libr-A that they have included the library in their plans for local business and e-government service infrastructure development. The library also attracted major new funding from the European Union's Rural Development Programme 2007 - 2013 to expand the web-portal²⁵.

The EIFL-PLIP impact assessment approach

Impact evidence has been fundamental to generating future support for the library services described in this paper. All used evidence of positive impact of their services to generate additional income for future sustainability, from both government and non-governmental sources. Public libraries traditionally produce library statistics that reflect their activities, but fail to demonstrate the effect that these activities had on the target group and are even less able to track and demonstrate longer term community impact. Therefore, EIFL-PLIP developed a framework that is built on the following principles:

1. Research focuses on results of library services for service users; how the service has influenced service users and the significance of the service to the user.
2. The impact assessment model is practical and can be implemented by librarians in-house, with minimal or no additional resources for data collection.
3. We encourage libraries to collect only data that will be meaningful to the library, for example, data that will inform management decisions and / or be useful in communication and advocacy.

Our impact assessment framework combines traditional project evaluation techniques such as counting the number of people trained or the number of computers installed with evidence about change in the lives of individuals and communities. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods are used – surveys, interviews, focus groups, and a variety of other methods. Baseline evidence about library use is gathered at the outset of new service, and impact evidence is collected a year later. In written case studies, EIFL-PLIP asks libraries to draw links between service benefits and the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

²³ Information is taken from Pasvalys 'Marius Katiliskis' Public Library's grant application to EIFL, October 2011.

²⁴ Pasvalys 'Marius Katiliskis' Public Library's web-portal for farmers, URL: <http://www.pasvaliodirva.lt>

²⁵ Information is taken from Pasvalys 'Marius Katiliskis' Public Library's final report, impact assessment and case study, November 2012.

Impact assessment results obtained through this approach are presented in the six short service examples described in this paper. These examples illustrate the effectiveness of both the new service development model and the impact assessment model, which have proved to be successful in different countries and different social and economic contexts.

Conclusion

The six services described in this paper demonstrate the effectiveness of small, resource-constrained public library services in contributing to community economic wellbeing in urban and rural areas. In urban areas, libraries that combine free ICT access and employment information services with more pro-active interventions like ICT training, job-seekers' training, motivation and counselling are helping people find jobs, thereby increasing individual and family income. By providing information about more effective farming methods, connecting farmers to markets and subsidy opportunities, and training farmers to use ICT, public libraries are helping rural communities to flourish. These six services also provide evidence of the effectiveness of the EIFL-PLIP service development model – in particular, the focus on community needs at the outset of service development and the impact assessment processes at the end of one year. The impact assessment approach does not calculate the full economic value of the library services; however, by providing credible evidence of numbers of people with new ICT skills; numbers of people who have found jobs and positive perceptions of service users about economic improvement, etc., it clearly shows how innovative services, using ICT can contribute to community economic wellbeing. This evidence has enabled libraries – despite austerity programmes and budget cuts – to generate resources to sustain their services.

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Practical suggestions

Practical recommendations are drawn from the EIFL Public Library Innovation service development approach:

Services must address real and known community needs -

Close to their communities, librarians often know, or believe they know, what local needs are. This knowledge is useful, but needs assessment research before designing services is extremely useful, to confirm the need, to refine understandings and to identify solutions. Community needs assessment also strengthens the link between the community and the library and creates positive feelings of participation and ownership.

Technology must be appropriate to the community and the context -

Understanding of local information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and its strong points and shortcomings will help prevent problems down the line. Issues include cost of technology interventions – including capital and operational costs; availability of maintenance support (does the library have an IT maintenance department? are there qualified technicians in the community?); service users' capacities and interests; where to buy computers, printers – are there any import duties? And many more...

Partnerships support, strengthen and sustain services -

Small public libraries, offering services that go beyond the traditional role of libraries, need the support of partners to plan, implement and sustain their services. Potential partners should be assessed, and partnership development and management processes need to be thought through. Partnerships are especially useful where expert knowledge is needed (for example, agricultural or health knowledge) and to help market new services and identify potential service users.

Credible evidence of service impact is fundamental to future sustainability -

Building quantitative and qualitative service assessment processes into project / service design from the start will help produce evidence of service impact. Service user testimonials are powerful advocacy tools.