A Tale of Public Libraries in Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania: The Case of Three Gates Foundation Grants

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Abstract

The Global Library (GL) initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supports public libraries as engines for individual and community development. Funding enhances access to information through publically available information technology in libraries. This technology is complemented by the provision of training and content to make it accessible and useful, and by impact assessment and advocacy to make the new services sustainable. GL has supported library modernization programs at scale in fourteen countries around the world. Based on findings on library perceptions, use, and impact from recent GL research across seventeen European Union (EU) member states, this paper focuses on projects in Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania. It offers a sense of how libraries in these countries have changed during the grant periods, presents key results obtained, and sets out prospects for the future. These prospects include greater attention paid by the EU to the increasingly important role that libraries can play in strengthening communities and improving people's lives.

Introduction

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy and productive lives. In developing countries, the foundation focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, the foundation seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation takes on some of the world's most challenging problems by making big bets that involve risk, by ensur-

ing that grantees' successes can be scaled or replicated for greater impact, by valuing sustainability and changes that endure over time, and by believing in improvements based on evidence-based decision making. The foundation's Global Libraries (GL) initiative applies these principles in working to improve the lives of information-poor people around the world. GL's work is built on the success of a similar program that connected two-thirds of U.S. public library branches to the internet between 1998 and 2003. The initiative helps public libraries provide free access to technology, with training and services to help users make the best use of these tools. This is based on the belief that access to information plays a critical role in development and that libraries are critical agents in improving health, economic, and social outcomes.

Country Grants, such as the three described in this paper, are GL's primary tool for supporting large-scale development efforts. These grants are made to countries that have a demonstrated need for improving access to information for their populations and that have existing library infrastructure and the leadership, ability, and resources to sustain the expansion of their present public library system into the future.

Over the years, GL has supported fourteen grants to countries around the world (for a description of GL's grant-making efforts, see Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). This paper lends insights into what has resulted from the projects in Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania. The text that follows is comprised of sections regarding each region, authored by key members of the respective grant teams. The sections for each country contain unique voices that cover a variety of topics: library usage and impact statistics, success stories and testimonials, and thoughts regarding the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

As each of these projects nears grant completion, these programs are keenly invested in handing over the processes and lessons they have learned to various partners who will take over their work in the long term. These library stakeholders include library associations and government agencies, whose role is to ensure that program results are sustained over time. GL's grants rely upon advocacy tools to increase support for libraries, with activities implemented locally by library staff and regionally and nationally by other library stakeholders. These efforts have led to successes in obtaining funds from national and local governments and from private companies: Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania have had additional opportunities to bring European Union (EU) funds to their public libraries. While library funding has increased in every country during the term of each of the grants, more national and local funds are needed to sustain and expand the vitality that has been achieved beyond the libraries that the projects were able to reach in each country.

GL recently commissioned the "Cross-European Public Library Impact Study," the results of which were released in 2013. The aim of this study

was to measure the perception of the benefits of information and communication technology (ICT) in public libraries in seventeen countries throughout the EU. It is the largest in-person library survey of its kind, with over 40,000 interviews conducted with the general public, library users, and onsite users of the technology (Technology and Social Change Group, 2013). The results are impressive indeed because they indicate the importance that libraries have had in the development of information access in postcommunist countries. While GL has invested $135 million to support libraries in Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania, the findings of this study illustrate the differences among these five countries and the remaining twelve EU countries that comprised the research sample:

- Better perceptions about public libraries were found using all metrics. Eighty-two percent of respondents in the five countries supported by GL funding thought that public libraries were "modern," as compared to 76 percent in the rest of the countries; 83 percent of respondents in the five countries GL supported by GL funding thought that public libraries were "innovative," as compared to 74 percent in the others.
- Higher proportions of people—91 percent versus a previous 82 percent—said that they have saved time and money, improved their well-being, and improved their level of education.
- Library and technology use remains significantly lower in the five countries than in the other EU countries in the study, however. Eighteen percent of the population across these five countries has used a public library within the past year, compared to 24 percent in the other twelve countries in the study. The highest usage rates were found in Denmark and Finland (approximately 60 percent), which is similar to recent usage rates found in the United States (Becker et al., 2010).

The findings of this study have been shared with the European Commission and are currently influencing conversations regarding whether and how libraries can be included in EU funding plans. Libraries in the five EU countries currently supported by GL, including Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania, clearly have more work to do in building up the user-ship that will maximize their impact. Nonetheless, the advocacy successes achieved in the EU to date are clear evidence of both the impact of public libraries in the region and the immense potential that lies ahead to do even greater good.

Bulgaria's Glob@l Libraries Program

In only five years, Glob@l Libraries-Bulgaria Foundation has brought significant changes to the lives of Bulgarian library patrons. The program has provided free access to technology in 960 of nearly 3,000 registered and active libraries in the country. The service offered to people who would otherwise have no such opportunity is among the most important of the

changes brought by the program. The arrival of computers and the new sense of cooperation among librarians have assisted children, young people, and adults, including people from disadvantaged groups, to learn, access information, and socialize more actively. The process of interaction among people that has been initiated means that the new technology in the public libraries of Bulgaria is likely to accelerate and has yet to achieve its best results.

Enhanced Patronage of Libraries
The data cited here are based on the Glob@l Libraries program in Bulgaria's final impact-assessment study conducted among librarians, library users, library stakeholders, and the general population by the ESTAT sociological agency between July and November of 2013 (Glob@l Libraries, 2013):

- The number of library users in target libraries has increased from 459,000 in 2009 to 614,000 in 2013 (34 percent) during the program's implementation period. Among the users identified, active users account for slightly more than 74 percent.
- Users come to the library more often. Between 2009 and 2013, the number of visits to libraries targeted by the study increased by 35 percent, from 4.4 million to slightly more than 5.9 million. In 2012, libraries targeted by the study attracted 72 percent of all visits to public libraries in these countries. Over two-thirds of users stated that they had been to the library more often because of the opportunity to use computers and the internet free of charge.

Increased Internet Usage in Libraries
In three years, the number of people using the internet in libraries almost quadrupled. As of autumn 2013, 321,000 individuals (4.7 percent of the population over age 7) had used a computer with internet access in a public library. In the GL program's target libraries, the internet is reported to have been used by between 79–90 percent of users surveyed. Meanwhile, trained librarians are providing library and information services via new technologies. The 2013 "Glob@l Libraries–Bulgaria Program Final Impact-Assessment Study" reports the following:

- Librarians have been trained by the GL program in Bulgaria. This training has included how to work with computers and the internet, how to provide contemporary library and information services via technology, and advancing staff members' skills with library management, communication, and the way in which they work with people and communities regarding advocacy and project development.
- In each library targeted by the study, there is at least one librarian who is prepared to assist users wishing to use the available technology. Data

from across Bulgaria indicates that since 2011, the training component of the Glob@l Libraries program has been the main means by which librarians have had access to professional development.

- Support for libraries provides new services via technology. New ICT-based services in areas like employment, healthcare, education, culture, communication, entertainment, and business are being offered in the libraries under the program. The interest in these services is increasing: the proportion of library visitors who have used electronic services in the libraries has increased from 60 percent in 2012 to 88 percent in 2013.
- Libraries offer access to computers and the internet to people who have no other access to technology. In fact, public libraries are the only access points for 15 percent of children, 7 percent of youth, and 21 percent of adults across Bulgaria.
- Disadvantaged populations were included in the information society. Among the visitors for whom the public library is the only access point to the internet, Roma represent 34 percent of children, 31 percent of youth, and 12 percent of adults; the unemployed represent 31 percent; and people with only primary or no formal education represent 28 percent.
- For many individuals, libraries provide the opportunity to use the internet for the first time. After the home, public libraries and educational institutions are the second and third most frequent places in which users access the internet for the first time.

Enriched Services in Library

Over the course of the GL Bulgaria program, responding to specific user and community needs, services in libraries have grown in the following areas:

- *e-communication*: e-mail/Skype, social media
- *e-culture*: art, local traditions, and history
- *e-employment*: writing resumes, submitting job applications
- *e-government*: administrative services, submitting tax declarations
- *e-entertainment*: hobbies and personal interests
- *e-education*: preparing for school, homework, and adult learning
- *e-health*: health status, communication with doctors/hospitals
- *e-business*: online trading, access to government subsidies

Within these growing service areas, we have seen the following:

- Visitors are actively using the new services. The highest number of people is attracted by the opportunities to communicate, to be entertained, to search for information related to culture and leisure, and to study or search for educational opportunities.

- The use of traditional library services has increased. The new services offered through technology have stimulated the usage and further development of traditional library services, such as book lending and reading programs.
- Opportunities to spread computer literacy and access online training have increased. Of target library users, 73 percent of children, 34 percent of youth, and 56 percent of adults have acquired basic computer skills, and more than half of youth and almost all adult users have learned computer skills at an intermediate level. An increase in the skills of surfing the internet has been observed among all users. Technology in target libraries is used for participation in training by one in five children, one in three youth, and one in ten adult users.
- Because of technology, reading levels have improved. In 2013, the target libraries stimulated 397,000 individuals, or almost two-thirds of registered visitors, to read more. These results were applicable across all user groups by age. Among target library users, 68 percent of 7–10 year olds, 66 percent of 11–18 year olds, and 54 percent of adults have improved their grades in school; and almost 161,000 users have improved their professional qualifications (for about one-fourth of these, this also led to increased income). The impact of technology is especially beneficial for minority groups.
- Opportunities for online job searches have increased. Librarians assist users in the job-search and -application process. This type of service has been used by 46 percent of adult visitors in the target libraries and 8 percent of youth—a total of 147,000 individuals. These services are especially effective for ethnic minorities: among them, the share of users reaches 59 percent of Romas and 56 percent of Turks, 59 percent of the unemployed, 57 percent of students, and 52 percent of people with low incomes. Overall, thanks to new library services, almost 19,300 individuals have received specific job offers; one-in-three of those who searched for jobs using these services was successful.
- People using libraries make informed decisions regarding their health. A total of 172,000 individuals have used at least one service related to their health during the past year. Almost 46 percent of adult library users have searched for health information for personal use through technology in libraries, and another 32 percent have searched for such information in order to help other people. Overall, 114,000 library users report having improved their health because of library services.
- There is easier access to administrative services. A total of 149,500 people (51 percent of adult visitors in the target libraries) used at least one service in the e-government area, which resulted in 113,000 who found the administrative information they needed, 93,000 saved time in communications with local and central authorities, and 11,700 became newly qualified to receive financial aid or another type of social assistance.

- Relationships were strengthened. Over 347,000 individuals reported communicating more often with their friends, relatives, and family using the technology available in libraries. More frequent contact strengthens relationships within the family, among friends and within the community at large.
- There was better communication on a local level and thus more active communities. New opportunities in the target libraries, along with the assistance of librarians, have stimulated the exchange of information and communication, especially in smaller settlements. This supports strengthening the social capital and development of local communities; it increases the sense of belonging to a specific region and caring for its future. The ICT available in libraries has also allowed for the integration of otherwise isolated social groups.

After five years of the Glob@l Libraries program in Bulgaria, target libraries are successfully operating as information and communication centers, and the focus now is on sustaining these program results for both users and society overall. This has several implications:

- Equipment and software in libraries need to be maintained and eventually replaced.
- Librarians need to keep their skills current and expand their knowledge with ongoing training. New library staff members need training as well to maintain the high level of user satisfaction.
- New services offered in libraries need to be constantly improved in response to users' needs.
- Partnerships that libraries have with other institutions need to be sustained and broadened to create synergies in society.

Libraries have a crucial role in society in all the ways described above. It would be advisable if a certain level of library-management centralization could be introduced by the Bulgarian government in order for the advances implemented to become standard services and sustained over time. A focus of the program's national advocacy efforts has been to achieve the recognition of the role of libraries in the information and social integration of the country's citizens. Many of the new ICT-based services in the libraries are being offered in partnership with governmental institutions. During the program period, specific outreach was oriented toward Bulgarian members of the European Parliament. Several meetings took place, aimed at informing these MEPs about the importance of library development and the significant efforts of the Glob@l Libraries–Bulgaria program. The importance of library development was generally recognized, but the response was that in order for anything to happen at the EU level, the initiative would need to come from the Bulgarian Parliament in order for the Bulgarian government to include libraries in EU funding

schemes. The good news here is that most Bulgarian libraries are recognized legal entities, which might facilitate their application process for EU funding.

The individual efforts of libraries are not to be discounted. Part of the training program for librarians includes advocacy and fundraising. Thinking is starting to change, leading to the idea that libraries themselves can fundraise in order to improve their situation. More and more people are recognizing the benefits that libraries bring to society, and the library is becoming more attractive to government agencies, donors, and corporate social-responsibility efforts.

Poland's Library Development Program

Computers, printers, projectors, fast internet connections, training on how to use Skype, e-banking courses, advice for job seekers, activities for the youngest, and much more: all these are available for local communities at Polish public libraries. For years, Poles visited libraries simply to borrow books, but changes have come in recent years. One of the key drivers was the Library Development Program, initiated in 2009 as a part of the GL initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The foundation's partner and grantee in Poland is the Polish-American Freedom Foundation (PAFF), and the program is implemented by the Information Society Development Foundation (FRSI). Poland has 8,200 libraries overall, and 6,300 of these are rural. Under the Library Development Program, over 3,800 rural libraries have received IT equipment (more than 11,000 various devices), thousands of librarians have participated in training courses, and hundreds of grants have been awarded to libraries to perform new functions relevant to communities' needs and to meet modern society's challenges and expectations. Libraries have started to cooperate more vigorously with other local organizations and institutions and to establish local partnerships. And librarians, who previously were typically isolated from one another, have begun to share their experiences. In summary: both these and other activities under the program have inspired significant changes in the manner in which libraries function and offer services to the population.

The role of the public library has changed. Contemporary Polish libraries have become the so-called third place—a space other than work and home where people spend their free time, learn, and pursue their hobbies, a place where, by doing things together, people establish relationships, which as a result builds the mutual trust essential in creating social capital (constituting an essential factor in the development of the countries from the former Eastern bloc). The library is also a place of access to ICT, where one goes online to find the information one needs, to talk on Skype with his or her family living abroad, to find a job online. These were the conclusions of the report "Why Poles Need Libraries?"

(Information Society Development Foundation, 2012), prepared after three years of implementation of the Library Development Program. This was the first effort to assess the importance of public libraries on their users' lives. Statistics show that one-third of the inhabitants of small localities use public libraries, and those libraries participating in the program are visited by over 2.5 million people annually. For the young, the library is, above all, a place where they meet, spend their free time, and learn; almost 70 percent of them improved their grades at school because of information found in the library. Almost 700,000 adults accomplish everyday tasks at the library, such as online shopping, paying bills, checking doctors' schedules, and staying in touch with family and friends. For almost 250,000 individuals, the library was the place of their first experience with a computer, and almost 200,000 have access to them only in libraries. The library helps people navigate the job-search process. In the library, the elderly learn how to use computers and to discover the online world.

Public libraries are open to all. Their democratic nature, combined with their array of offerings, enable modern libraries to attract more new users. However, it remains a challenge to reach those people who do not have a tradition of library use. Here, the image of the public library is of huge importance because for years libraries were perceived as quiet places, associated solely with books. These were the conclusions from the survey that FRSI commissioned at the beginning of the Library Development Program. However, subsequent years brought a change: a 2013 media survey showed that the perception of libraries has evolved. There are more reports about activity that goes beyond the basic book-related services. Also, the library is no longer simply interesting because of technical modernization; reports about hardware deliveries are being gradually replaced with articles about people going to libraries for computer courses, meeting with friends, enjoying photo exhibits, or participating in training courses such as on e-banking. This is a result of libraries' changing offerings, as well as of the advocacy activities implemented by FRSI and the public libraries themselves (following the advocacy-training courses for librarians carried out under the program).

Both the manner in which libraries are perceived and their increasing importance in the development of local communities are factors that influence the relationships between libraries and their local authorities, who in Poland are responsible for library financing. Analysis of the data of the Central Statistical Office clearly shows that spending on libraries has grown, and this growth is stronger in the areas covered by the Library Development Program (Borowski, 2014). Since 2009, the budget of libraries participating in the program has increased by 8 percent, as compared to that of nonprogram libraries, which have experienced only 3 percent growth. Another particularly glaring difference recorded in the national statistics between the program participants and the other libraries is the

significant growth in the number of computers connected to the internet available for public access (61 percent versus 36 percent).

In total, there are 8,200 libraries in Poland, the vast majority situated in rural areas and small towns. Libraries are typically funded by the local authorities, but recently, more and more private and social institutions are recognizing libraries' potential to help meet their needs. The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage supports, among other things, the modernization of library infrastructure under its Library Infrastructure project, which is a part of the long-term, governmental Library+ program, initiated in parallel to the Library Development Program thanks to PAFF/ FRSI advocacy efforts. On the basis of the agreement signed in 2009 between the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the Ministry of Administration and Digitization, FRSI, and Orange Poland, all public libraries have now been offered free internet services, and approximately 3,500 libraries are making use of this.

Microsoft is an important Polish library supporter. It has offered free software to all libraries in rural areas (not only to those receiving hardware through the Library Development Program). These libraries have the opportunity to receive free operating-system upgrades and end-user software. To date, almost 1,800 libraries have benefited from this support. Microsoft also finances the Link to the Future project conducted by FRSI, consisting of meetings held in libraries between young library users and young professionals in the field of ICT. These meetings have so far reached over 10,000 secondary school students, inspiring them to think about their professional futures and the increasing role of ICT in the economy. Libraries are also benefiting from the corporate social-responsibility initiatives of the Funmedia Company, a Polish company, which currently provides over 1,500 libraries with free access to e-learning English courses for children and adults.

In the upcoming years, an important opportunity for public libraries will be the government's Digital Poland Operational Program, cofunded by the EU during 2014–2020 and with a total budget estimated at €2.2 billion (almost $3 billion). The program refers to the potential of public libraries to impact e-inclusion at the local level, understood as a lifelong learning process to increase skills related to practical life. Overall, the increasing recognition of the role of education and soft skills in development also bodes well for the future of libraries. The long-term conditions and development of libraries will, however, be determined primarily by local authorities. A challenge, but at the same time also an opportunity, will remain the need for librarians to maintain effective communications with local decision makers to convince them of the key role of the public library as a building place for human and social capital. The libraries will also face the necessity of continuously adjusting their offerings to meet the changing needs of users. In order to keep current the libraries'

mission and vision, librarians will have to monitor social changes, track trends, and redefine libraries' functions, with an emphasis on the growing importance of ICT.

The modernization of the libraries that was initiated with the help of the Library Development Program continues and has achieved a critical mass. This opens the possibility of more targeted activities that broaden the processes of change, such as inspiring the libraries to develop new services based on the role of ICT in modern society, building partnerships with entities from other sectors, building a community of leader librarians, and developing librarians' advocacy skills. It is in these areas that PAFF and FRSI intend to continue their activities to consolidate the achievements of Poland's Library Development Program.

Romania's Biblionet Program

Biblionet is GL's grant in Romania. It started as a pilot project in 2007 and as a national implementation program in March 2009 (with $26.9 million in funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation). The objective is to contribute to making a better life in the communities served by the GL program through the facilitation of technology and information access through public libraries. Early successes appeared readily and helped us to understand how libraries can better serve their communities through access to information. It became clear that libraries participating in Biblionet are reaching more citizens to quickly, easily, and cheaply achieve their personal goals. Through their use of the public libraries' computers, library patrons are finding jobs, linking to experts to resolve medical conditions, and successful in obtaining the needed information to develop their businesses. Children are coming to libraries for homework assistance or to play games; adults are paying bills or taxes online, reviewing legislation, or interacting with local governments. Since 2009, a massive transformation of Romanian libraries has occurred, with many libraries becoming efficient community centers offering a wide variety of technology-related services to their patrons, such as IT training and access to and assistance with wide areas of new services and information types, often in partnership with other organizations, both private and public.

After five years, the Biblionet program has produced the following results:

- PCs, routers, printers, and projectors have been installed in 2,264 public libraries (out of 2,836 libraries in the country).
- Over 9,700 PCs have been installed for public use.
- Forty-one training centers have been created (one per county), each with eleven laptops.
- Over 3,000 librarians have been trained in IT.
- Ninety-five librarians have been accredited as trainers.

- Over 180,000 librarian-training hours have been achieved.
- Over 88 percent of Romania's population is now living in localities where Biblionet operates.
- There have been over 9.5 million visits to public libraries to use computers and the internet.
- Over 625,000 individuals have used computers and the internet for the first time in a public library.
- Over US$17 million has been invested in hardware, software, and librarian training.
- Over US$14 million has been contributed by local governments to library renovation and operating costs.
- Over 10,000 library patrons have been trained on personal financial management in partnership with VISA Europe.
- Over 90,000 farmers have been assisted at public libraries to obtain over US$155 million in agriculture subsidies.
- At least seventeen new libraries have been created with the purpose of joining Biblionet.
- At least ninety-three small libraries have been saved from closing, and multiple librarian positions have been maintained through Biblionet advocacy efforts.

Success Stories
From Biblionet newsletters and reports, there are a number of success stories regarding the social and economic benefits resulting from increased funding to libraries that illustrate best practices.

Money IQ. Almost 65 percent of Romanians struggle to manage their day-to-day financial needs. Combined with low levels of knowledge about financial matters, most are "unprepared for the unexpected." An innovative partnership between International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) Romania and Visa Europe resulted in more than 10,000 citizens and 900 librarians being trained in the fundamentals of financial literacy. By learning about personal budgeting, savings, managing credit and debit, and other topics, the participants are now able to make more informed choices about their futures. Catalin Cretu, Visa Europe's general manager in Romania, shared his enthusiasm about the initiative: "For us, the partnership with IREX Romania is very important because it opens a new horizon to which we haven't had access until now: the network of public libraries in Romania and their patrons. . . . Working together with IREX helped us reach our objectives related to financial education, and we want to extend our partnership in Romania in 2013, for the benefit of all those who want to learn how to better manage their personal finances" ("Biblionet Romania Activity Report," 2012).

Healthcare. Romanian libraries have embraced the cause of sharing healthcare information with great enthusiasm. The range of services

provided cover areas like reproductive health, the effects of alcohol and drug abuse, pulmonary diseases, HIV/AIDS, and first aid. Services are offered through discussions on various topics, meetings with medical staff, organizing information indices, and the creation of courses with the help of select volunteers. Eurostat figures showing that one-in-three people involved in accidents in Romania dies through lack of first-aid treatment caused Gh. Asachi County Library Iași to take action. It approached the Red Cross, which provided first-aid training to three librarians; these, in turn, created a website with an online training course and resources for further learning. With a small grant from Biblionet (US$2,500), they bought training materials and a high-tech first-aid dummy to use for demonstrations. The service has so far trained ninety librarians in eighty-six libraries across the country. In just over a year, these libraries have trained over 2,000 people to administer first aid. The library says that it is not about the money, but instead the big hearts that make things work. The following is a testimonial from a volunteer, Danut Nita: "First aid training is essential! I am 17 years old and last summer I volunteered for training of librarians in first aid. I believe that these courses are essential because emergencies are unpredictable, and very often when emergencies happen there is no doctor around. Right after I took part in this training I became a volunteer with the Red Cross, where I now have the opportunity to put my knowledge into practice" ("Biblionet Romania Activity Report," 2012).

Sex Education. In 2013, Romania assumed the task of adopting a national reproductive-health strategy and implementing comprehensive, age-appropriate, and mandatory sex-education classes in all schools. Romanian adolescents have the advantage of the "Sex vs Stork" project, which is the first online sex-education platform in the country. The project consists of short videos on various sex-education topics, which are subtitled in English. Only in Romania, via the Biblionet program, have public libraries been included in the national reproductive-health strategy as appropriate venues for related information dissemination.

"Mommy Loves You" Online Communication Project. Labor migration keeps parents and children apart for long periods (2.5 million Romanians work abroad), resulting in the children left behind often feeling deserted. In response, the "Mommy Loves You" project brings children closer to their parents via the internet. The goals of the project are to generate viable connection opportunities among estranged family members, as well as to work as part of a multidisciplinary effort to diminish the number of suicide, child abandonment, and even homicide cases among the children left behind. The leading librarians of the Dolj and Neamt county libraries have developed a data-collection system as a model before embarking on such a project at the library. The project continues to look for funding and new partners in order to grow.

Farming. In 2011, IREX Romania concluded a collaboration agreement with the Payment and Intervention Agency in Agriculture (APIA) aimed at using computers donated to public libraries as new collection points for agricultural-subsidy applications. The purpose of this collaboration is multiple:

- To ease the burden on farmers to fill out the forms. Farmers formerly had to travel to the nearest local APIA offices, and this process could take several days and require them to pay for transportation.
- To provide the local public administration with the opportunity to help farmers. Most mayors and local councils are interested in farmers obtaining the subsidies more easily and on time. The existence of computers connected to the internet in public libraries makes this process easier. In many localities, the mayoralty and the library informed the community in various ways: posters, announcements on radio, television and local media, public meetings, and from the pulpit during church services.
- To help libraries be more useful to the community. Because of these new computer and internet services, public libraries quickly came to provide this service and others that are useful to their communities.

In 2011, 2012, and 2013 combined, over 90,000 farmers were assisted in this way through public libraries, and they obtained over US$155 million in agriculture subsidies. These same farmers saved an estimated 180,000 workdays by not having to travel outside of their hometowns to complete the subsidy applications, and around US$1 million in travel costs (for the most recent report on the program, see "Biblionet APIA Collaboration," 2013). Because advocacy is so important to Biblionet's work, these results indicate that libraries are helping public administration achieve strategic-development objectives in employment, education, healthcare services, and so on. Indeed, assisting in completing the subsidy applications is additional proof that libraries can be useful to their communities. The following is a testimonial by Ioan Gârbacea, the mayor of Hălchiu, Brașov County, who told us about the opening of the APIA center at the public library: "I was e-mailed from IREX a notification about the signing of the protocol with APIA. All the persons who came to the Agricultural Chamber within the Mayoralty were informed about this activity at the library. The transportation of the APIA expert from Brașov to Hălchiu was paid by the mayoralty." Here is another by an 82-year-old farmer in Gighera, Dolj, Ion Pârvulescu: "I found out from the mayoralty that applications can be submitted at the library and that made me happy. At my age, it is difficult to travel to Bechet, and, moreover, keep standing for an entire day. The librarian here is very friendly."

More Work To Be Done

There is a group of librarians that happily and efficiently embraced changed and are very happy to reinvent themselves. They deliver new ser-

vices, are active in implementing projects in partnerships, have proved that they are important actors within their communities, and have better relationships with their local administrations, which fund all public library activities. Not all libraries have been this dynamic; the shortages of staff and funding (as a consequence of financial problems during the last few years) and insufficient flexibility and understanding of community needs has caused some libraries to fall behind. Indeed, it is possible that this gap in library innovation was exacerbated during Biblionet's implementation, stemming from the self-selection brought about by enterprising libraries. In this respect, there is still more work to be done. The Romanian Library Association (ANBPR) has become more visible to its members, and it now has a new and different image. There is room for the ANBPR to continue to better serve its members and also to persuade librarians of the usefulness of being actively involved within the association. In many communities now, the public administration understands the library much better than it did at the program's start in 2009. But there are still places where more communication and advocacy work will be needed to make progress in this regard. Libraries understand that they can be stronger and more efficient in partnership with other organizations. But this success is coming along with a lot of challenges: for example, the need for more planning skills, better communication, and increased management abilities. These are areas needing further development and work in many libraries across Romania.

Conclusion

The insights from Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania give strength to the Gates Foundation's conviction that public libraries are key actors in the effort to develop communities and improve people's lives globally. Through GL's grants, libraries are seizing this opportunity and performing with impressive results—from the contributions to educational outcomes and jobs in Bulgaria and Poland to Romania's support of preventative health and access to agricultural subsidies. Governments and the private sector are recognizing public libraries as cost-effective avenues to achieve their goals, and they are responding with enhanced support for programs and services.

As the terms of the grants in the three countries come to a close, their achievements will hopefully inspire the remaining libraries toward becoming modernized, innovative organizations, capable of sustaining and renewing this energy over time. In Central and Eastern Europe, as in the rest of the world, library staff will need to focus on areas that are crucial to sustaining their impact on people's lives: continual updating of services and infrastructure in order to meet ever-changing user needs; effective outreach so that library access is maximized; and vigorous advocacy for the resources needed to accomplish this work. GL has great expectations

that the European Commission and member states will expand their dialogues about the contributions that libraries can make, and hence will, in turn, create the policy environment so that libraries have access to the capital and know-how to make real, lasting changes for their communities.

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