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Providing Internet Access Through Public Libraries: An Investment in Digital Inclusion and Twenty-First Century Skills

Introduction

Twenty-first century development goals and initiatives demand greater efforts to leverage emerging online information resources. The internet has grown and evolved over the last 50 years—reflecting the importance of information, but also itself driving increased demand for information in every field and part of the world. However, access for all is still lagging, with only 35 percent of the world's population of seven billion connected.[1] This lack of access to knowledge—and lack of opportunity to generate and disseminate new knowledge—is preventing some of the world's poorest communities from meeting their most severe challenges.

A 2011 Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression report to the UN Human Rights Council declared internet access a fundamental enabler of human rights.[2] Several of the world's governments, including those of Estonia, Finland, France, Greece and Spain, have formally recognized internet access as a human right for citizens to stay informed and use the information and online services needed in 21st century life.[3]

In an age where internet access is so crucial for accessing essential public services, health information, education and financial services, it is vital that governments particularly in developing countries take action and implement plans to provide internet access to the nearly two-thirds of the world's population that is currently unconnected. Even in developed countries such as the United States, nearly 40 percent of households do not have access to high-speed internet services.[4] In the developing world, the internet is overwhelmingly used by upper-income, educated individuals in urban areas.[5] New technological advances only exacerbate the digital divide.

At a time of tight budgets, all governments need to find cost-effective, smarter and more efficient ways to ensure that citizens are able to realize their potential through access to the internet.

2011 World Population:	7 billion
Internet Users:	35%
Non-Internet Users:	65%
Users in the Developed World:	13%
Users in the Developing World:	22%

Source: International Telecommunications Union

"Given that the Internet has become an indispensable tool for realizing a range of human rights, combating inequality, and accelerating development and human progress, ensuring universal access to the Internet should be a priority for all states."

- Frank La Rue, United Nations Special Rapporteur

For references, please visit http://www.beyondaccess.net/igf

Connectivity Is More Than Internet Access

People need information, and governments need their people to have access. With growing demand for online information, those who cannot afford or sufficiently benefit from private internet access need public locations where they can meet their online information needs. These places must be stable, permanent, trusted institutions, with skilled staff to provide training and support, particularly for the estimated 4.5 billion people who have not previously used the internet.

As institutions that already prioritize for access to information and learning, public libraries can become key players in government strategies to provide universal internet access. Given that the majority of non-internet users have lower incomes and less access to an education, public internet points must have a focus on building literacy and computer skills in order for all people to make use of the internet.

A recent study of libraries as internet providers showed that library users tend to access more information about health, government, language and culture than people who access the internet from other public locations. Public library users also report a higher positive impact of the internet on their lives in areas such as health, education, time savings, income and financial savings.[6]

With the right policies and support, libraries can serve as cost-effective, sustainable centers for inclusive internet access. Regardless of their size or level of development, most countries around the world have public libraries. In fact, globally there are more than 320,000 public libraries—and 73 percent of them are located in developing and transitioning countries. As the funders and administrators of public libraries, local and national governments have an interest in seeing public libraries succeed at their missions, and they can ensure libraries have the funding to meet local needs.

The modern role of public libraries has grown into serving as hubs for economic and social change.

Trained library staff help users find and apply online information as a tool for development, improving capacity and knowledge in health, education, agriculture, the environment and income generation. For instance, public libraries are teaching coffee farmers and fishermen to use the internet to better promote their products and access market prices. They are helping people access information on early childhood development and nutrition, HIV/AIDS and maternal health. And, they are giving people access to information on organic farming, and showing them how to combat climate change and deforestation.[7]

> *"The library is seen as essential to the individual as well as the community by all groups surveyed."*
>
> *- EIFL Study on Perceptions of Public Libraries*

A study of perceptions of African public libraries shows that while most people believe that public libraries have the potential to contribute to community development, most of those libraries are currently under-resourced and are not equipped with technology tools. Regardless, even when lacking updated resources, all groups surveyed view the library as essential to the individual and community.[8] These conclusions point to the potential for impact if public libraries receive greater government support.

Given that public libraries have dedicated, ongoing budgets for staff and information materials and are respected by the community, governments need to look at further investing in public libraries—institutions they already fund—as a natural venue for delivering internet training and access to the general public.

Libraries as Public Internet Access Points: Examples from Across the Globe

Around the world, governments that have invested in public libraries to deliver information and communications technology (ICT) have seen a return on investment, producing a wide variety of positive community development outcomes.

Chile

In 2003, the national Digital Literacy Campaign was launched with the goal of training 500,000 Chileans in ICT by 2005, largely via a network of over 300 public libraries. At the start of the project, less than 8 percent of public libraries offered public access to technology.

Through a nationwide effort that included partnerships with software, internet and other companies, millions have benefited from the program. The free training has helped Chileans launch businesses, navigate market information and develop technology skills to improve their job competitiveness. Today, the BiblioRedes public library network alone has delivered **more than 10 million internet and computer workshops**, and has helped participants create more than six thousand local content websites.[9]

Jamaica

Jamaica Library Service (JLS), the national government agency managing the island's public libraries, has the challenging but exciting responsibility of reducing digital disparities to promote individual, community and national development. Through its 2006-2011 Strategic Development Plan, it has introduced **new computers in over 100 public libraries**. Some of these libraries have even reported a doubling of computer and internet usage over the previous year, in part due to targeted technology training for youth and seniors.[10]

Moldova and Poland

Moldtelecom, Moldova's national telecommunications operator, entered into an agreement to not only connect all Moldovan public libraries to the internet, but also reduce connection and usage fees. This is enabling thousands of Moldovans to access needed information, particularly government services promoted under Moldova's new open government plan.[11]

Chile's **BiblioRedes** program has not only transformed national perceptions of public libraries, but has also contributed to a 25 percent increase in the number of public libraries throughout the country since the start of the project.

More than 3,500 Polish public libraries are able to offer their users free internet access, and even more libraries will be connected in the future. A 2012 agreement between the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the Ministry of Administration and Digitalization, the Information Society Development Foundation and the telecom Orange Polska has already brought **free online access to millions** of library users in Poland.[12]

Uganda

Uganda's Hoima Public Library provides free internet access and training for health workers and the general public. Its "Improving Community Health Through ICT" program, combined with a series of public lectures and films, yielded significant results: just two years after the service launched, a survey found that over **38 percent more youth, 39 percent more men and 29 percent more women were using the library** to seek health information.[13]

Recommendations

Reflecting on the achievements of governments that have turned to public libraries as partners in enabling public internet access, Beyond Access coalition members and the Internet Society recommend that all governments develop strategies to invest in public libraries for development.

To governments:

1. Governments should officially recognize public libraries as preferred venues for public access to the internet, establishing programs and partnerships to offer free internet services through library branches.

Public libraries exist in nearly every country and culture as institutions committed to facilitating access to information. With the right policies and support, libraries can serve as cost-effective, sustainable hubs for universal internet access. Their government-funded operations are typically more stable, and are less subject to short-term timelines that affect many other projects. By offering internet access through public libraries, all people, regardless of their economic status or location, are able to access information that will improve lives.

Several governments, like Moldova and Poland, have arranged free or discounted internet programs for their public libraries and/or have negotiated with private telecommunications companies for discounted public library rates. These programs can serve as models for other countries.

2. Governments should include libraries in plans for ICT and broadband expansion, as well as digital inclusion policies.

Libraries should play a central role in media and information literacy training. Many governments hope to significantly increase citizen computer literacy and access to ICT, but there are opportunities to more fully incorporate and maximize the value of public libraries in those plans. As governments seek to produce or reevaluate ICT plans to generate more active internet use for development goals like education and business development, they should turn to public libraries as partners.

Public libraries can help governments create a development-oriented, knowledge-based and media-literate society that achieves socioeconomic growth through the integration of ICTs into people's lives.

To libraries:

1. Library staff must have access to ICT training.

Library staff must advocate to receive ICT training in order to create programs that address critical community needs and increase internet literacy. Only with this training can librarians guide the public in using ICTs for development. It is librarians who ensure that public libraries remain relevant to the communities they serve, and they who must insist that national and local governments make library ICT training a priority.

2. Libraries should participate in local and national initiatives and discussions on internet policies, digital inclusion, broadband access and open data.

When governments convene stakeholders for establishing policies on digital inclusion and technology access for all, librarians should insist on having a role in discussions. Within key information initiatives the library community must assert the critical importance of public libraries as a bridge between underserved communities and the potential of the internet.