Helping Bridge the Digital Divide in Romania – How IREX's Biblionet program and Romania's Public Libraries Increasingly Afford Access to eGovernment Services to Digitally Excluded Citizens

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Meeting: **124 —** *e-Government: the role of librarians* **—** **Government Information and Official Publications Section with Government Libraries**

Abstract:

IREX's Biblionet program is a five-year endeavor that aims to assist Romanian public libraries in better serving their communities through a nation-wide system affording training, computers and free internet access. Through a partnership between IREX, the National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians (ANBPR), local and national governments, and libraries through the country; the Biblionet program helps to foster the development of a modern public library system in Romania as a step towards improving the socio-economic conditions of its citizens. To achieve this goal, Biblionet is developing a network of public access computer facilities in 2,000 Romanian public libraries, supporting libraries that prioritize public access to information, training librarians to become experts in adapting new technologies meeting community needs, establishing 41 county library training centers to afford the Romanian public library system a training infrastructure, and partnering with the National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians (ANBPR) to help the association build sustainable administrative structures to respond to the new and changing needs of modern libraries.

What is Biblionet?

Biblionet is a five-year, 27 million dollar development project implemented by the International Research & Exchange Board (IREX)[1] with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The project supports the transformation of public libraries into places where citizens can come together, inform their lives, and contribute to community discourse. Four primary activities of the Biblionet program are:

1. Equipping more than 2,000 Romanian public libraries with technology (computers, printers, software, scanners and video projectors) so citizens have better access to information.

2. Training over 3,000 librarians in how to use new technology to provide better services to library visitors, and to help empower librarians to develop new library services and advocacy skills. To better facilitate this process IREX is also establishing up to 41 new training centers for librarians across the country.

3. Helping to develop the capacity of the National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians (ANBPR)[2] to advocate on behalf of libraries and librarians and to demonstrate to policy makers how important the public library is in meeting the needs of citizens.

4. Fostering government support for the recognition of the essential role of libraries in a modern society. This includes using libraries equipped with public access computers to afford citizens e-government services that they would otherwise be unable to access.

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[1] http://www.irex.org - IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing thought leadership and innovative programs to promote positive lasting change globally. IREX enables lindividuals and institutions to build key elements of a vibrant society: quality education, independent media, and strong communities. To strengthen these sectors, our program activities also include conflict resolution, technology for development, gender, and youth. Founded in 1968, IREX has an annual portfolio of over $60 million and a staff of over 400 professionals worldwide. IREX employs field-tested methods and innovative uses of technologies to develop practical and locally-driven solutions with our partners in more than 100 countries. IREX promotes positive lasting change globally. We enable local individuals and institutions to build key elements of a vibrant society: quality education, independent media, and strong communities. To strengthen these sectors, our program activities also include conflict resolution, technology for development, women and youth. With more than 40 years of experience, IREX is guided by our enduring values and is committed to organizational excellence, measurable impact and thought leadership. We employ field-tested methods and innovative uses of technologies to develop practical and locally-driven solutions with our partners.

[2] http://www.anbpr.org.ro/ The National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians in Romania (ANBPR) was founded in 1990 from a desire by librarians to express and defend their professional interests. The Association has over 3000 members. The Association's primary focus concerns professional development, sharing of experiences and successful practices. Through annual conferences the Association contributes to promote new development directions, the implementation of advanced technologies, the acquisition of experiences and best practices.

The Biblionet program followed a planning process that commenced in November of 2008 and saw 12 Romanian libraries equipped with technology for public access computing and librarians from those communities trained in IT skills. Building off lessons learned from the planning process, Biblionet launched the Romania national competition for the first round of libraries to participate in the program on April 23, 2009. As of May 2011, Biblionet operates in 37 of Romania's 41 counties, and the program has equipped 921 public libraries, certified more than 70 librarians as trainers, and has trained more than 1300 librarians in IT skills, new services development and/or advocacy. Additional training and equipment will be rolled out in waves over the next three years.

The impact and success of the Biblionet program is being assessed in a number of ways, one of which is through pop-up surveys designed to gauge user satisfaction and to identify potential new library services. The pop-up survey was initially launched in February of 2010 at the 235 public libraries that were included in the first round of the Biblionet program. By late April of 2010, more than 3,625 users had responded; and from these responses some trends regarding the type of information being sought bu library patrons could already be identified. For example, approximately 47% of respondents had said that they were successful in solving a personal problem using computers and the internet. More than 254 people reported using computers at the library to communicate with relatives abroad. A high number of people indicated that they found information related to education (775) and/or health issues (193). One person reported: "I recently gave birth to my second child and I didn't know that I could take advantage of social service payments. I went online and found that indeed I am entitled to this premium which nobody informed me of. I found the article online, the law, and even the application form."

Second, survey results showed changes in the general attitude and satisfaction in relation to new library services: 3,363 said that the library had become more useful since providing free Internet access; 3,349 considered that the image of the library had improved overall; 3,327 said they recommended visiting the library to their friends; and 3,302 said they would recommend that their friends visit the library.

Two years into implementation, Biblionet has passed through the initial phase of establishing systems for library selection, computer procurement, and basic training, and is shifting gears to focus more on expanding training opportunities and strengthening the professional network of librarians. A variety of smaller projects and activities supplement the four primary activities in order to spark creativity and community-based thinking within the public library community. Among these activities are study tours to learn about innovative practices in different countries, advocacy workshops and initiatives, and an increased focus on the impact and evaluation of public library services. Foremost among the new services being offered at Romania's public libraries are e-government services, and the attempt to use libraries as a vehicle to bridge the digital divide by helping patrons take advantage of on-line government services.

About Romania and Romanian Public Libraries

Although a full generation has passed since the overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu's autocratic dictatorship in 1989, only recently have the scars of

economic devastation, ethnic tension, endemic corruption, and citizen mistrust of government begun to heal. Since its entry into the European Union (EU) in 2007, Romania has undeniably made advances in addressing the vast gaps in political, cultural and economic opportunity left by the country's fifty year communist legacy. Although Romania has initiated the process of economic modernization, the country continues to face a range of challenges—from economic to medical to technical. Economically over 25 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and the annual per capita income as of 2010 was $11,500 dollars. Elderly Romanians and pensioners face enormous obstacles in maintaining an acceptable standard of living, having paid dues into a pension system that now lacks funds. Further, a significant Roma minority languishes at the margins of society. Access to technology is limited as dilapidated infrastructure and antiquated technology must be replaced and disparities between urban and rural Romania have widened in recent years. However, as of 2009, there were approximately 8 million internet users in Romania (34th in the world), and as of 2010 roughly 2.5 million internet hosts (37th in the world).

Public libraries in Romania were simultaneously neglected during the 50 year communist regime and isolated from their international counterparts at a time of great change in the library sector. As a result, public libraries in Romania today are not appealing to the general public although this perception is changing. As of 2008, only 10% of the population used public libraries, and the role of public librarians was limited to very traditional services such as book circulation and organizing cultural events. Few public librarians have formal training, and those who do studied under a university curriculum in need of reform.[3] Presently, there is neither a coherent national strategy for library and information issues, nor a widespread understanding of how libraries can benefit society. A massive cultural shift needs to occur for librarians and libraries to establish themselves as valuable, modern institutions. One means for doing this, however, is for the library to partner with both national and local government institutions to afford the public access to e-government services.

ICT for Government and Public Services

The European Union defines eGovernment to be the ability of government bodies to "use the tools and systems made possible by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to provide better public services to citizens and businesses."[4] In an effort to maximize the benefits of eGovernment services throughout the Union the EU has created a series of policies and coinciding action plans, the first from 2006 – 2010 and the current 2011 – 2015 action plan help guide EU eGovernment policies to fruition.

Action Plan 2011 – 2015

A new generation of open, flexible and collaborative eGovernment services is needed to empower European citizens and businesses, to improve their mobility

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[3] Rapeanu, A. C., & Dovinca, C. (2007). *Education for Library Professionals in Romania*. Retrieved from http://www.inforum.cz/pdf/2007/rapeanu-anca.pdf

[4] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment/policy/index_en.htm

within the internal market of the 21st century and to ensure that public services can serve an economy which relies on the networks of the future.

The Action Plan identifies four political priorities based on the Malmö Declaration, agreed on 18 November 2009 at the 5th Ministerial eGovernment Conference in Malmö, Sweden

Empower citizens and businesses

Reinforce mobility in the Single Market

Enable efficiency and effectiveness

Create the necessary key enablers and pre-conditions to make things happen

The Commission's main mission is to optimise the conditions, for the development of cross-border eGovernment services provided to citizens and businesses regardless of their country of origin. This includes the development of an environment which promotes interoperability of systems and key enablers such as eSignatures and eIdentification. Services accessible across the EU strengthen the digital single market and complement existing legislation in domains like eIdentification, eProcurement, eJustice, eHealth, mobility and social security, whilst delivering concrete benefits to citizens, businesses and governments in Europe. The Commission will lead by example in further implementing eGovernment within its organisation.

The combination of all these efforts should lead to an increase of the take-up of eGovernment services. By 2015 50% of citizens should use eGovernment. The target envisaged for businesses is 80% by 2015.[5]

How eGovernment Services can Revitalize Romanian Libraries and why are Romanian Libraries Uniquely Positioned to Afford Citizens E-Government Services?

Every month millions of Romanians wait on long lines to pay bills, taxes, parking tickets, get marriage licenses, and business permits. After waiting in these lines the question of corruption continues to be a reality. The development and dissemination of eGovernment services offers the ability to change this phenomenon, and Romania's nearly 3,000 public libraries are uniquely positioned to address these challenges. After Romania's entry into the European Union in 2007 the Romanian government and specifically, the Ministry of Communications and Information Society (MCIS), were tasked with setting national goals based on Romanian communications needs and European Union priorities. The implementation of a national strategy for offering eGovernment services aims to be completed in 2015. The question of how to reach Romanian citizens and afford them eGovernment services, however, especially in bridging the digital divide between those who have

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[5] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment/action_plan_2011_2015/index_en.htm

access to technology and those who do not, is critical. The Biblionet program and our partners in the ANBPR believe that libraries with public access computers and librarians trained in IT technology can play a critical role in this process, and indeed, the public library sector is already responding to both government policy objectives and citizen need.

In an effort to bridge current Romanian eGovernment policies elaborated through line ministries to targeted populations throughout the country, IREX's Biblionet program, together with the National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians (ANBPR), the Ministry of Communications and Information Society and the Ministry of Agriculture are seeking innovative ways to include public libraries in reaching out to Romanian citizens in an effort to afford them the benefits of newly designed eGovernment services. In the difficult economic climate currently that Romania currently faces, IREX's Biblionet program and the ANBPR are exploring new and innovative ways to collaborate with the national government in an effort to demonstrate the value of including public libraries when designing eGovernment service outreach strategies. Biblionet and the ANBPR believe that public libraries equipped with computers and internet access, and librarians trained in technology and service delivery, afford the Romanian government a unique and highly cost effective opportunity to reach millions of Romanians who do not have internet access, are sufficiently computer literate, or fully understand how to effectively utilize new eGovernment resources.

Specifically, this paper will address three case studies involving nascent e-government services in Romanian society, identified by IREX in an effort to use public libraries to both promote the new services and guide citizens to gain the greatest benefits from the latest government amenities.

The first involves the Ministry of Communications and Information Society, IREX, and the ANBPR in their collaborative effort to use public libraries to aid in the operationalization of a new on-line tax payment system (www.ghiseul.ro) that that was launched on March 30, 2011. Soon after the Ministry launches the new eGovernment service ministry representatives will work in collaboration with the Biblionet program and the ANBPR to train librarians to further guide populations throughout the country and to assist them in understanding and navigating the new on-line tax filing platform. In the second case study this paper will highlight how the Ministry of Agriculture, having received over one billion Euros for farming subsidies and in 2010 was only able to disperse 17 per cent of the total budgeted amount, but in cooperation with Romania's public libraries will aim to launch a new effort in 2011 to reach out to more farmers and dramatically increase the absorption rate by training public librarians to provide direct assistance to farmers in applying for online farm subsidies. In this regard the Ministry of Agriculture will inaugurate a campaign to inform farmers with little or no computer skills as well as those farmers without internet access to go to those public libraries trained and equipped through the

Biblionet program for guidance in applying for funding. Lastly, the Romanian Ministry for Health is preparing an online portal where any Romanian citizen may dialogue with doctor to receive preliminary guidance based on symptoms or preliminary medical records. Such a system will benefit millions of citizens living in rural Romania with limited access to health care providers.

The Romanian Ministry of Communications and Information Society

In an attempt to align Romania with the superseding eGovernment policies and timeline of the European Union, Romania's Ministry of Communications and Information Society has launched an online web portal that will allow Romanians to pay local taxes with a bank card online. The system was launched on March 30, 2011[6] and will include every local government by the end of 2012. IREX together with the National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians and the Ministry of Communications and Information Society have entered a formal partnership, through a protocol signing, which aims to identify as a pilot, five small communes to enter the web portal this coming summer. The five communities will each need to possess a public library and to have completed all the training as part of the Biblionet program. Together with the ANBPR, IREX will examine and determine the preeminent means for guiding the public in those communities to take full advantage of the new online services. Lessons learned will allow IREX and the Ministry of Communications to begin outlining a national training program for all libraries that will become connected to the internet.

The Romanian Ministry of Agriculture: The Agency for Payments and Interventions in Agriculture (APIA)

Romania's entry into the EU afforded the nation access to 38.2 Billion Euros[7] for the period 2007 – 2013. Each year the Ministry of Agriculture, through the Agency for Payments and Interventions in Agriculture (APIA), maintain a budget through which they may allocate just over one billion Euros in Agricultural subsidies to Romanian farmers. In 2011, IREX, the ANBPR, and the Agency for Payments and Interventions in Agriculture have all agreed to promote the use of the more than 800 libraries, which have already joined the Biblionet program, in an effort to reach greater numbers of farmers while providing them with a convenient space, within their local public library, to apply for their annual subsidies. The goal is to provide a greater number of farmers more acute guidance, through their local library and with

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[6] http://www.financiarul.com/articol_58672/mcsi-lanseaza-ghiseul-ro.html

[7] http://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Economie/79097/Cat-va-plati-Romania-la-bugetul-UE-in-perioada-2007-2013.html

the resident librarian that will ultimately result in the higher absorption rates and wider community access to library services. As the Ministry of Agriculture further promotes the online system for farm subsidy applications there becomes an ever growing need to identify local resources with the capacity to guide farmers to accurately apply for their subsidies. IREX will conduct research through 2011 to determine the number of farmers that were able to apply for the subsidies through their library, the amount of money that returned to their community as a result of librarian guidance, and how to better promote libraries to farmers for the subsidy application period in 2012.

The Romanian Ministry of Health

Currently, the Romanian Ministry of Health is preparing to develop an interactive web-portal aimed at providing Romanian citizens with free, live guidance with respect to health related issues. The new online portal will allow Romanians, especially those living in rural Romania, a unique opportunity to receive professional guidance in regards to health related symptoms or initial direction when an individual has recently received test results. In order for the Ministry of Health to maximize the benefits of such a portal and new online service, representatives of the ministry will need to acknowledge the deficiencies related to internet access amongst Romanians living in rural society and their overall lack of computer literacy. Understanding the timeline for launching the new health service portal, IREX has initiated dialogue with the ministry in an effort to promote libraries as the place for Romanians to both learn about the new service as well as to receive the best guidance in how to maneuver through its applications.

Conclusions

In working day-to-day to develop the public library sector in Romania, IREX has identified two major hurdles that must be overcome before the public library sector will be able to keep up with their European co-nationals. Firstly, national and local governments need to have continuous information and guidance as to the benefits of public libraries for Romanians, for community, and especially for the national government to effectively implement many of their national policies. IREX is continuously working with the National Association of Public Libraries and Librarians to creatively seeks out and illustrate library and librarian value for society to our government partners through the gathering of relevant information that best makes the case for public libraries. Secondly, both the national government and local governments will need to continue their investments to bring the public library sector to par with the international community.

The Biblionet program will generate the most comprehensive public library reform to ever impact Romanian society, but it will not be enough to fully raise the prestige, public use of the facilities, and continued support without clear acknowledgement by government representatives of the incredible impact public libraries have on the lives of Romanian citizens. Together with the Ministry of Culture, IREX and the ANBPR have developed a series of partnerships with line ministries in an effort to aid those ministries in effectively implementing new eGovernment services through public libraries. Not only will Romanians receive the full benefits by accessing eGovernment services through public libraries, but they will also receive the necessary guidance, by a trained professional, to most effectively put those services to use.

The many benefits IREX has already identified has placed IREX and the ANBPR in a unique position to begin requesting that the Romanian government add public libraries to the development strategies that will ultimately define the funding beneficiaries for the next EU budget cycle 2014 – 2020. Providing public libraries with a window to access the next round of EU Structural funds will ultimately afford the public library system a tangible budget and timeline to ultimately align themselves with other EU countries and providing the library system with a reasonable foundation from which to continue evolving.