Public Libraries for Local Development
(A Project Concept Paper)

The project is implemented by Public Service Development Agency of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia in cooperation with IREX as part of the Beyond Access Initiative

Implementation period: April 2014 – January 2015

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that in order to ensure access to electronic public services and information to the public at large it is vital to identify mechanisms and tools to narrow the so called "digital divide", so that the whole population can benefit from the public sector reforms. Equality of opportunity in the digital age requires that all individuals, especially those living in the rural areas, have access to online information along with the skills to navigate the internet.

Georgia has approximately 600 public libraries spread across the country, representing an untapped potential that could benefit local communities. Public Service Development Agency of Georgia (PSDA) believes that partnering with public libraries and using them as shared facilities for traditional library and community gathering purposes, as well as adding more value through introduction of ICT technologies will complement its efforts to improve public service delivery at the local level and contribute to the local development. As a result of the present initiative "Public Libraries for Local Development" implemented by PSDA in cooperation with IREX's Beyond Access Program, libraries will turn into an additional tool by means of which PSDA will further support local government entities and local population and strengthen their capacity. This will lead to creation of a mixture of innovative measures focusing on service delivery improvements especially for those with limited access to internet resources.

Existing public libraries, especially those at the village level, are thus considered as an effective instrument to address the issues of digital exclusion and serve as catalysts for local development. To this end PSDA plans to cooperate with the public libraries to use them as a shared facility to combine conventional library services and Government service delivery, introduce ICT and train its personnel to deliver better services distinct from traditional librarian's functions.

Keywords: Libraries, Development, e-Governance, ICT, Local Development, Innovation, Public Services

This paper accepted by executive review

Background

For the last decade Georgia has undergone a process of rapid transformation. Reforms, implemented after nineties, emphasized the rule of law, introduction of e-Governance, fighting corruption and ensuring transparency, and making public services available to the all strata of the population.

Usage of ICT to the great extent defined success of implemented reforms; however not full-fledged country-wide. The "digital divide" is still a serious problem. The level of the population's ICT skills and internet penetration is quite low, especially in areas distant from regional centers. Many people, even those who visit the library, are not aware that they can find information, fill out applications, and receive public services online. Therefore, the rural population and part of urban population cannot benefit from the developments happening in the country.

This in its turn is creating a mismatch between the supply and demand of new opportunities; supply side is developing rather fast through public and private organizations moving their services into virtual space and offering increased efficiency. However, demand side is lagging behind, as people either do not have access or lack skills to use these services. Besides services, supply of news and information is moving to virtual space, however, the lack of internet access and skills unintentionally excludes part of the population from the ease of exercising their right to access to information and services they are entitled to receive.

The Strategy

The Government of Georgia acknowledges the need to identify mechanisms and tools to narrow the digital divide, so that the whole population can benefit from public sector reforms, especially those connected to e-Government services and access to public information. Equality of opportunity in the digital age requires that all individuals, especially those living in the rural areas, have access to online information along with the skills to navigate the internet. Hence building only powerful supply side for services and information is not enough. Access to ICT requires access to hardware, access to internet and skills. Even if internet and skills is provided, access to hardware, especially acutely in rural Georgia, remains a problem due to the poverty and low income. As development and eradication of poverty largely depends on the use of ICT, lack of access locks rural population in a vicious circle difficult to break. One of the solutions to remedy this shortage identified by the Public Service Development Agency (PSDA) of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia is the creation of public spaces, where facilities are shared among public and private organizations and where people can access computer and internet free of charge. Hence PSDA has undertaken initiative – Development of Community Centers, within the framework of the EU funded project "Introduction of e-Governance in Local Self-Governments".

Community Centers aim at making public, private, and municipal services accessible for citizens at the village level and equipping them with free access to internet and computers. Community Centers are centrally located buildings (in a village or several villages) housing a Trustees' office, agriculture or rural life related projects, etc. Community Centers are the center of a particular neighborhood offering multiple, key services for the local population. By means of Community Centers citizens can freely access e-services provided by different levels of government including social assistance, land registration, identification documents (passport and electronic ID), agriculture consultations, and payment of utilities. The piloting of Community Centers proved to be successful convincing Georgian Government to enhance the initiative further and increase the number of the Centers to be constructed across the country.

The above described measure has allowed significant improvements in the process of 'production and consumption' of public services, due to substantial innovations in terms of services (what is offered), but mainly in terms of process (how it is offered).

And yet, the above initiative is not enough to comprehensively address the digital divide as it requires substantial investments, which can be difficult to source. Furthermore, it is a matter of expediency to spend all resources in creating something new, when there is a substantial network of unused potential, like public libraries, to build on. Public libraries possess physical space, which is currently under-utilized due to the lack of needs people have nowadays.

Georgia has approximately 600 public libraries (including branches) spread across the country, representing an untapped potential that could benefit local communities. PSDA believes that partnering with public libraries and using them as shared facilities for traditional library and community gathering purposes, as well as adding more value through introduction of ICT technologies will complement its efforts to improve public service delivery at the local level and contribute to the local development. As a result of the present initiative libraries will turn into an additional tool alongside with Community Centers by means of which PSDA will further support local government entities and local population and strengthen their capacity. This will lead to creation of a mixture of innovative measures focusing on service delivery improvements especially for those with limited access to internet resources.

Along with investing in a new type of infrastructure in the form of Community Centers, existing public libraries, especially those at the village level, are also considered as an effective instrument to address the above issues and serve as catalysts for local development. Thus PSDA plans to cooperate with the public libraries to use them as a shared facility to combine conventional library services and Community Center functions, introduce ICT and train its personnel to deliver better services distinct from traditional librarian's functions.

The pilot project to be implemented in 2014 (April 2014 – January 2015) will cover 4 selected libraries (Zugdidi, Khulo, Khidistavi and Nukriani Libraries) comprising a mixture of village and municipal-level libraries. The initiative will aim at introducing the concept of Community Centers into the selected libraries and equipping them with modern technologies (internet, IT equipment, new books and related literature).

The main objectives of the project are to:

1. Ensure access to public information through libraries
2. Improve communication between the local population and the local government
3. Build the capacity of the local librarians and assist them in mastering e-Governance tools
4. Conduct public awareness campaign and contribute to spreading e-Governance at the local level.

To achieve this following sub-objectives have been identified:

1. Bring physical space in the pilot libraries up to date, thus making them comfortable for visitors
2. Equip libraries with internet access and computers
3. Develop ICT skills transfer mechanism to librarians and library facility users
4. Renew library resources, so that the libraries regain their role of a place nurturing the process of discovery

Project Overview

Modernizing libraries

The initial phase of the project will focus on four libraries in two villages and two municipalities. All four libraries will reopen with more "modern" looks and be equipped with new computer workstations and WiFi throughout. The modern libraries will feature open, welcoming environments, meeting rooms, and multiple Internet access points. This will allow libraries to serve the current needs of the population and become Community Engagement Spaces — places where residents can come together with local businesses, NGOs, or government officials to address community needs.

Training librarians

The modern libraries in Zugdidi, Khulo, Khidistavi, and Nukriani will require "modern" librarians – that is to say, librarians who are not only familiar with all the services of the new libraries, but can also assist library visitors in using these services to their best benefit. The project will deliver three phases of trainings to project participants. The first phase will focus primarily on basic IT skills and how to teach these skills to others. The second phase will focus on delivering new services, including e-Government. The final phase will focus on access to information and project planning and implementation, giving participants the tools needed to develop and execute programs beneficial to their community. These trainings will include librarians from the four partner libraries, as well as librarians from nearby libraries, local community organizations, and municipal offices, to ensure that all sectors can appreciate the benefits.

Connecting citizens to public services

Through partnerships with the PSDA and private companies, the four participant libraries will help their patrons access e-government services, mobile companies, financial information, and a host of other beneficial resources related to citizenship and migration, social assistance programs, and social-legal certifications. The libraries in Nukriani and Khidistavi will house the same 17 e-Government services offered by PSDA. In addition to being able to train patrons on different 21st century skills, the librarians involved in the project will also work with them to identify information needs and direct them to the appropriate resources.

Vision for a modern library

A modern library should:

- ✓ Provide Citizen Services
- ✓ Have comfortable environment
- ✓ Provide access to technology
- ✓ Training/digital literacy
- ✓ Provide access to information (through different means such as books, newspapers, internet, radio and TV)
- ✓ Consultation (librarian hotline)
- ✓ Build partnerships (Gateway between citizens and different organizations and programs)
- ✓ Serve as a space for citizen engagement
- ✓ Poses open stacks/books
- ✓ Offer online services

Library position and partnership opportunities

Already for a couple of decades libraries experience scarce funding. The latter resulted in damage to infrastructure, lag in development, loss of consumers and lack of motivation among librarians. The situation has worsened also due to isolation and low awareness of librarians on new developments and opportunities given by modern technologies that could bring about change. Although there were a few attempts of intervention aiming at mentality shift and awareness raising

among the librarians and respective governmental bodies the impact was minimal. However, there are some success stories. The National Scientific Library of Georgia is a good example; it made a significant contribution to the introduction of modern tools in libraries and initiated establishment of Libraries Association that helped to bring the librarians community together. Initiatives of the Association to contribute to the libraries' improvement were not always supported and encouraged by the respective Government bodies; hence the attempts were not sustainable and were rather sporadic.

As soon as PSDA became interested in libraries' potential to enhance its initiative enabling to provide population with more free access points, it started searching for partners. Along with Libraries Association PSDA approached National Parliamentary Library of Georgia (NPLG). NPLG is distinguished for its successful experience in the usage of ICT. As a result of its efficient approach notion on NPLG among the population is very high. NPLG is widely using social networks to highlight events and projects implemented by the Library. Moreover, NPLG's premises are actively used for different purposes starting from hosting various exhibitions ending with meetings of politicians. This is a vivid and real-life example to follow.

Public libraries need to become focused on the challenges and needs of their users. They need modernized infrastructure allowing visitors to read silently, discuss their discoveries in the space purposefully designed for it, use computer facilities and obtain guidance on how to effectively receive full benefits of the facilities offered. Therefore there are two main aspects which need to change - physical infrastructure and attitude towards how things can be done, requiring awareness, training and support.

Factors which contribute to the lack of doing the above mentioned are mutually reinforcing - lack of funding and lack of motivation. Lack of funding is justified through the idleness of libraries, low number of users, thus not getting it into the list of priorities when finances are scarce and socio-economic situation is rather poor. At the same time, without necessary funding, libraries do not possess the capacity to make their facilities more attractive, so that it changes from idle place into a lively community space. Therefore considering the libraries from a different perspective, through a lens of e-Governance, is essential for bringing new life to libraries, creating a viable model and then using this success story for advocating for the support along with other libraries.

Currently a few libraries and civil society organizations in Georgia, with the help of donors are working on creating precedents of libraries, which can attract users. Thus the aim of PSDA, through this project, is to add value to these efforts and to create a model which unifies all the above stand-alone initiatives into one unified concept. The latter also includes an important new element -provision of e-Government services and other support activities, hence bringing more interested parties enabling sustainability and development.

Along with the delivery of the assigned public services, libraries similar to the Community Centers should become an efficient instrument fostering civic engagement at the local level. One of the key conditions creating an impetus to civic engagement in decision making processes is access to public documents and freedom of information. Information must be accessible to general public; thus public libraries can play the pivotal role here. Therefore, PSDA approached the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), an organization the main mission of which is to promote transparency of public information and Governmental accountability in Georgia and consequently received IDFI's commitment to partnership within the framework of the project. The organization also actively supports the development of modern electronic Government, e-Participation, e-Democracy and e-Transparency in Georgia.

Conclusion

Delivery of government services online is a key component of a transparent and accountable government. There are more than 230.000 public libraries in the developing world that are safe, inclusive spaces that could provide free internet access and be a typical location for people to use e-governance services.

If as a result of the PSDA's pilot project "Public Libraries for Local Development' libraries can reinvent themselves and embrace an expanded role of public service providers combined with an equally important role of online information centers, the impact on the individuals and communities at the local level will be substantial. The libraries can also serve as sustainable partners to Government and other stakeholders on the regional level.

Hence through the above described initiative PSDA strives to build on the untapped resource of public libraries in Georgia and develop them into a modern space enabling local access to information and services through shared contemporary community space. Apart from serving as an important platform for improved access to information and services, the library development initiative also aims at: a) development of local opportunities at the rural level 2) bringing voices of local population online 3) enabling civic engagement by linking government with citizens.

IREX's Beyond Access Program, as a major supporter of PSDA in the given initiative, has vast expertise in bridging this "digital divide" by both promoting awareness of the resources available to citizens and training librarians in how to help citizens efficiently access these services. Thus, a team composed from all relevant actors backed by their experience and expertise has been formed to accomplish a common goal — transform Georgian public libraries into the engines of local development.

Biography

Nana Tsiklauri joined Public Service Development Agency of Georgia in August 2013 as the Head of International Relations and Donor Coordination Division. Since then she became actively engaged in establishing partnerships with various international organizations and donor agencies working in the Governance domain. She is also intensely involved in the design and implementation of various projects and initiatives of the agency aiming at improving public service delivery in Georgia with a strong citizen-centric approach and focus on e-governance and public service innovation.

Before joining PSDA, Nana has been working with a number of international agencies and local NGOs in the field of development cooperation in various sectors. Her experience in the public sector is underscored by a Master's Degree in Public Policy and Administration from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Department of Government and a Master of Public Administration Degree from the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA). She also holds a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations from the Tbilisi State University.

Over the last years she has focused on Decentralization and Local Governance issues, agile Governance models and citizen-centric public services. As part of the ongoing projects she is actively involved in initiatives aiming at introducing innovations into the way public services are designed and delivered, fostering e-skills development, and application of design thinking and behavioral insights to inform public policy.