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Published online: 22 Feb 2021.

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Neglected to Indispensable: Lessons from beyond Access for Global Public Library Reform and Development

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ABSTRACT

Beyond Access was the first major global attempt to connect the international development and public library worlds. Taking the form of a series of projects in a dozen countries meant to help catalyze library development around national goals, the program operated from 2011 to 2018. Starting from a point at which libraries in most low – and middle-income countries were neglected, disused and staffed by librarians with outdated skills, it effectively launched public libraries into national dialogue in some countries and failed to do so in others. This article explores the conditions and actions that led to effective projects and what lessons for future library development efforts might be gleaned from the program's work. In Myanmar and Georgia, the program attracted new investment into public libraries aligned with central government digital strategies. In Bangladesh and the Philippines, the program integrated public libraries into education efforts where they had been previously ignored. With more than a quarter million public libraries in low – and middle-income countries, there remains vast potential for library systems to reinforce their relevancy in the 21st century, attract new resources, and provide vital services. Library leaders around the world can build on the experience of Beyond Access to help inform initiatives to revive libraries around modern needs.

Introduction

In Palaces for the People, Klinenberg (2018) describes "social infrastructure" as the "physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact". "When social infrastructure is robust," he explains, "it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbors." Klinenberg pinpoints public libraries as a vital component of social infrastructure, and describes at length the ways these free public spaces contribute to community health and cohesion. Though first published in 2018 and largely focused on the United States, Klinenberg's definition echoes efforts by the international development community over the past 30 years to promote the strengthening of social capital and foster democratic development globally, largely under the umbrella of assistance to civil society. But neither the United Nations Development Program's annual Human Development Report nor

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the World Bank's World Development Report mention public libraries between 1990 and 2013.

Though maintained in varying degrees of repair and utility, as a free community space open to everyone, public libraries' absence in the development dialogue represented a missed opportunity. Public libraries exist in some form in most of the world's countries – a 2011 count revealed more than 350,000 public libraries worldwide of which more than a quarter million were in developing and transitioning countries (IREX 2011b). If investments in community development were bypassing public libraries and creating instead something more ephemeral and with fewer roots in their communities, scarce funding was being wasted and opportunities missed.

Public library systems in low – and middle-income countries represented an under-appreciated and underused social infrastructure in a global development environment where community-level bases for social interaction were constantly being sought. What was missing was some nexus between two silos. The international development world needed to see the value of public libraries. And public libraries needed better ways to highlight themselves and develop methods for working with those pursuing social development goals. The Beyond Access program was an effort to establish this link.

The inception of Beyond Access

The U.S. non-governmental organization IREX was selected by the Gates Foundation in 2007 to implement grants for its large-scale public library development programs in Romania and Ukraine. These programs were part of the Foundation's Global Libraries initiative, which ended up investing around 1 USD billion in public libraries worldwide by the time it closed in 2018 (ALA n.d.).

IREX's history in managing civil society programs put it a position to recognize the potential represented by public libraries to tap into this global search for a community-level public institution. The Beyond Access program emerged from discussions with the Gates Foundation and its partners as an effort to foster widespread awareness around the untapped potential of libraries to contribute to international development (IREX 2011a, 2).

While a full assessment of whether Beyond Access accomplished these goals is best left to external evaluators, this paper will examine program outcomes, review the lessons derived from 6 years of programming, and set out an agenda for further research and activities related to international library development.

Methodology and approach

This article takes the approach of a case study. Written by one of the program's chief designers, who then served as its director for Asia between

2014 and 2019, it cannot be considered an objective overview of the success of the model. Rather, by examining the original concept, the landscape on which Beyond Access operated and the outcomes in some of the places where it worked, the aim of this work is to illuminate lessons learned through program implementation. As public libraries are under constant pressure to reinvent themselves, and they remain a ubiquitous public institution globally, it is hoped these lessons will inform future library reform and development efforts.

Literature review

To understand the starting point for Beyond Access, it is useful to examine the three intersecting themes out of which the program emerged. First, we observe that public libraries in developing countries were often depicted using common themes of aimlessness and decay. Second, we explore past library reform and modernization efforts, though these had rarely taken place with any significant scale in developing countries outside of the Gates Foundation's Global Libraries program grants. Finally, we reflect on the 'ICT4D' field, or Information and Communication Technology for Development. Program staff saw the exclusion of public libraries from the ICT4D debate as one of the primary starting points for the program. Reviewing where telecenters had failed helps make the case for how public libraries might serve as a sustainable solution for public information and civic engagement.

Only one major study in the first decade of the 21st century addressed the conditions of developing country libraries. EIFL's Perceptions of Public Libraries in Africa explored how both members of the library community and those outside it viewed existing public library networks in Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Uganda in 2010 (Elbert, Fuegi, and Lipeikaite 2012). Its conclusions and the themes it introduced are echoed by many others who researched individual library systems in developing countries around the same time. These overarching descriptors of libraries converge around a few common assertions: libraries are underfunded, the resources and services they provide are outdated and their usage is limited to very narrow audiences. There is a recognition of missed opportunities – authors acknowledge that public libraries could be valuable institutions, but that library communities have not yet seized on the moment to establish themselves as relevant in the 21st century.

Libraries suffer from neglect and underfunding

Ignatow (2011) sets the stage for a widespread disinvestment in libraries related to a lack of profit incentives in an age of privatization and globalization. Other researchers document the results. The EIFL study observed that, "in many countries where the need is greatest, public libraries are under-resourced"

(Elbert, Fuegi, and Lipeikaite 2012, 150). Government officials surveyed in the study admitted that libraries deserve more funding (Elbert, Fuegi, and Lipeikaite 2012, 159). We find nearly identical commentary around the world. Owoeye and John-Okeke (2012) call funding for the Lagos Public Library system in Nigeria "inadequate." Libraries in the post-Soviet republics of Georgia, Armenia and Uzbekistan have "fallen victim to inadequate funding, neglect and theft" (Johnson 2014, 131). Russia's "public libraries … were confronted with sharp budget cuts … [and] the material condition of public libraries was further aggravated." (Pape and Smirnova 2018, 782). The Foundation (2014) found that funding for Myanmar's public libraries by the Asia Foundation in 2013 "is very limited and often unreliable." India's public libraries "are in an abject state" (Ghosh 2005, 181). In nearby Bangladesh, "non-government public libraries have been neglected from the beginning because of lack of funds" (Shuva 2005, 163).

When libraries are underfunded, they become outdated, underused and viewed as irrelevant. Analyses of developing country public libraries in the early 2000s were in near-universal consensus that public libraries were not positioned to serve their communities broadly. Gomez, Ambikar, and Coward (2009a) summarized what nearly all specific regional research would confirm, that in their current condition, libraries had little broad appeal, writing that "public libraries were seen as 'cool', safe or relevant in very few places … they tended to offer mostly outdated information."

Few associated public libraries with technology. EIFL's survey reported only 5% of respondents associated libraries with computers. (Elbert, Fuegi, and Lipeikaite 2012, 157). In Lagos, public libraries now only "serve as reading and study rooms for students, who in most cases bring their own materials" (Owoeye and John-Okeke 2012, 242). Botswana's demand for ICTs was increasing, but public libraries have "so far struggled to meet these information needs" (Maswabi et al. 2011, 410). Moscow's libraries were by 2010 "invisible on the cultural radar and neglected as cultural institutions" (Pape and Smirnova 2018, 784). In Georgia, Armenia and Uzbekistan, "there appears to be little appreciation at government level of how libraries and documentation centres could serve their nations" (Johnson 2014, 143).

Libraries are falling short of their purpose

Most of the studies referenced above appear motivated by the gap between libraries' potential and their current state. Ignatow (2011):

> Citizens without access to books, newspapers, or the Internet have little if any legal opportunity to develop the human capital needed for socioeconomic advancement. Thus public libraries would seem to be more indispensable than ever, at least for those nations seeking to move up the global value chain.

This common vision of libraries as drivers of development energizes much of literature, with ambitions for libraries that span social, economic, cultural and economic spheres. Bangladesh's libraries should be "one of the most powerful social institutions to develop nationwide cultural and educational activities" (Shuva 2005, 166). India's public libraries "have a major role to play in bridging the digital divide" (Ghosh 2005, 181). Lagos's libraries are meant to "function mainly as informal universities" (Owoeye and John-Okeke 2012, 237). In the former Soviet Union, libraries could be "part of the foundations for the knowledge-based societies" (Johnson 2014, 131).

Commonly expressed is the belief that libraries should support not only education, but underpin newly democratic societies. Myanmar's library network could serve as "the information infrastructure needed for its citizens to participate in the reform process" (Asia Foundation 2014, 1). Moscow's libraries could become "a place for discussion and a place where people could just be and meet in the public space" (Pape and Smirnova 2018., 785). But the barriers to this transformation are librarians themselves. Authors paint librarians as traditional, poorly trained and reluctant to change (Pape and Smirnova 2018, 789; Shuva 2005, 161; Ghosh 2005, 182; Johnson 2014, 135; Owoeye and John-Okeke 2012, 242.)

Reviewing earlier library reform and modernization projects

Despite the poor conditions of libraries in many countries, coordinated efforts to address neglected libraries were rare. Overall, very little has been written about public library reform efforts outside of North America and Northern Europe. Rajsic, Bucher, and Osei-Poku (2012) study of the early 2000s Singapore transformation project and Pape and Smirnova (2018) examination of a 2013 Moscow reform project are exceptions, though both of these deal with relatively advanced economies.

Given the uniqueness and scale of their investment, it is not surprising that the literature on library reform is then filled out by accounts of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Global Libraries programs. Chiranov (2010) reports on the early efforts of the Biblionet program in Romania. Sawaya et al (2011) discuss the advocacy components of foundation grants in Global Libraries' first 10 countries. Maswabi et al. (2011) introduces the foundation's Sesigo program in Botswana. Fried et al. (2014) reviews the foundation's grant programs in Bulgaria, Poland and Romania. As a Gates Foundation library program, Beyond Access's managers were deeply involved in the learning process documented by these latter works. However, most of them focus on the impact of the foundation's investments across a range of development indicators, rather than the process of getting there.

Rajsic et al and Pape and Smirnova both identify catalysts for Singapore and Moscow's library reform initiatives as coming from outside the library system.

Singapore's effort was within a broader national effort to prepare Singapore for the digital age (Rajsic et al 2012, 267) while Moscow's was launched by a group of civic activists (Pape and Smirnova 2018, 786). Both note the importance of leadership – effective in Singapore's case, but in Moscow's, the project came apart as leadership changed and leaders were unable to navigate the nuances of the bureaucracy. (Pape and Smirnova 2018, 789). The reasons for this divergence in outcomes are a topic to which we will return as we examine the lessons of Beyond Access.

Reviewing the Gates Foundation investment in libraries

Writing about the Global Libraries programs, authors focus mainly focus on three kinds of outcomes – new services, increased visit rates, and higher budget allocations as a result of the first two (Fried et al. 2014; Maswabi et al, 2011; Sawaya et al, 2011). These metrics informed how Beyond Access would measure success in its own programs. The value of libraries can be measured by both looking at the new services offered, and the number of visits to libraries. Success in persuading governments of the value of investing long-term in public libraries can be gauged by funding levels. The key takeaway from the Global Libraries studies is summarized by Sawaya et al. Advocacy for investment must "be focused on identified decision makers' priorities, using evidence collected to demonstrate how libraries can contribute to those priorities" (p. 469).

Competing models for public information access

Telecenters were a late 1990s solution to information access popularized by development agencies in many locations. The Global Public Access Landscape Study defined telecenters as "a public place where people can access computers, the Internet, and other digital technologies that enable people to gather information, create, learn, and communicate with others while they develop essential 21st-century digital skills" (Gomez 2009b, 7). Telecenters were essentially invented in order to provide a library-like public information space with an electronic angle, but the idea that widely available existing institutions could fulfill this role was not debated. Despite wide-ranging investment, by the early 2000s, telecenters were already failing in most places. (Hosman, 2011; Coward 2010; Gurstein 2014).

TASCHA researchers Sears and Crandall (2010) were the first to draw attention to the fact that "libraries and ICTD[1] share an interest in the use of technology to achieve their ultimate goals". Coward (2010) suggested that the library community could "incorporate the ideas and solutions emanating from the ICTD community and adapt them for delivery through libraries."

Putting libraries into practice as filling the telecenters space was more of a challenge. Library staff were found "frequently ill prepared to help patrons

with their computer use, and even less to deal with technical problems, virus, and other malfunctions in the equipment" (Gomez, Fawcett, and Turner 2012, 129). But by situating libraries within the same developmental space as tele-centers and cybercafes, the authors laid the groundwork for further experimentation and a broader acknowledgment that libraries were an intuitive host for public technology access. Beyond Access was intended at its outset to push on the boundaries of this discussion.

An overview of Beyond Access

Beyond Access was an umbrella program which sought to catalyze public library reform in about a dozen countries by applying a common methodology. As discussed in the section above, libraries in most countries were perceived by decision-makers as irrelevant storehouses of old books. IREX designed Beyond Access to help stand up libraries in low – and middle-income countries to serve as a vibrant, indispensable 21st century community asset.

Beyond Access launched with projects in Peru, Uruguay, Nigeria, Mali, Ethiopia, Georgia, Myanmar, Philippines and Bangladesh. In Beyond Access terms, a 'project' was made up of several ingredients:

- a local partner which could be a National Library, a library association, or an NGO working on library-related issues. IREX provided grants to these partners, who would serve as the primary project coordinator.
- cost-sharing resources from a funding source, such as a government, foundation, or private sector CSR fund.
- training for librarians (and often training of trainers which would then be replicated within the library system) in new library skills related to the project theme.
- monitoring and evaluation systems that could be used to assess progress and report on change to government, donors and partners

Beyond Access country-level projects aimed then to help shepherd willing library systems from this state of neglect to one of modern relevance, and a more prominent place in the national development discussion. The goal was to revive valuable social infrastructure that had fallen into disuse.

Key program outcomes

While Beyond Access worked in individual countries as described in the (Table 1), it is also important to consider its impact on the international level. By representing public libraries in the international development discourse by using active examples of library contribution to national priorities, Beyond Access generated a new space in which libraries could generate

Table 1. Key program outcomes by country. Two key goals on which to assess Beyond Access's results were aligning new library programs with development initiatives, and funders and governments employing libraries as an asset integral to their own development strategies.

Country	Outcome	Follow-on funding and programming
Myanmar	By 2018, more than 150 libraries were providing free internet and device access and conducting technology and information literacy programming. Libraries were acknowledged nationally as a lead local institution in supporting digital and educational programming. During the program's first year, at 55 pilot sites, more than 16,000 people used the internet for the first time at a participating library (IREX 2015a).	The Walmart Foundation funded a safe migration/anti-trafficking project that used libraries as information centers for potential labor migrants and their families. Facebook funded an information literacy project based at libraries. Microsoft funded the Tech Age Girls program to strengthen leadership and technology skills among young women. Ooredoo expanded its support of internet and devices at libraries, as well as funding future iterations of the Tech Age Girls project.
Bangladesh	20 participating libraries documented measurable impacts for children library users versus their classmates who didn't visit the library. Children who visited participating libraries reported having storybooks at home at a rate three times at the beginning of the program, and there was a 50% increase in the rate reporting their parents read to them at home – two key non-school ingredients of early literacy capacity. There was also a doubling among library visitors in the time they spent reading each day, and a 50% increase in the number reporting they read for pleasure.	The World Bank funded a mother tongue reading materials project that built off Beyond Access's experience in the Philippines and its library network in Bangladesh.
Philippines	Whereas public libraries had been left out of technology programs prior to Beyond Access, five years later, they were seen as a leading ingredient in the effort to provide public access to technology. When the government launched its new "Tech4ED Centers" program (Technology for Economic Development), libraries participating in the Beyond Access program were among its most prominent successes, frequently winning awards. In 2019, two libraries were among three centers nationally named in the outstanding category (Sanchez 2019).	A new Department of ICT thin-client technology program in 2018 provided computers to dozens of public libraries. Libraries participating in Beyond Access continued to expand services. Two libraries – in Cebu and Quezon City – became the first to stay open 24 hours a day.
Georgia	Beyond Access connected the national library, Georgian Library Association and the PSDA through its project in Georgia, giving Georgian libraries access to a new funding stream that could both renovate out-of-repair buildings and provide devices to offer new technology-powered services. The project not only began reviving disused libraries where it worked, but it was successful in getting a specific mention of libraries in the government's Open Government Partnership action plan. An entire 'commitment' section of the plan is entitled "transformation of public libraries for regional development". The document reads that "libraries will serve as an additional opportunity to increase capacity of communities and local governments" (OGGF, 2014, 15).	The Georgian Library Association applied for and received funding for modern technology and internet in more than 130 libraries.

investment and participate in development debates. In the long-term, these accomplishments support the case for the legitimacy of public libraries to play a role in development programs.

Lessons learned

Reviewing the outcomes of the Beyond Access projects, key lessons that may be gleaned fall under two main themes. First, Beyond Access's results suggest some directions for future investment in public library reform in low – and middle-income countries. Even in 2020 as this article is written, many countries remain saddled with outdated library infrastructure, indistinct from the situations described in the literature review section, despite the passage of a decade or more. With each passing year, unreformed library systems risk falling into greater irrelevance as their resources dwindle and other institutions capitalize on the gaps unseized by libraries.

Beyond Access demonstrated that with the right focus and approach, there are ways to pull library systems out of this death spiral and reclaim their relevance to society. The exact path looks different in each situation, but Beyond Access's experience points to a series of useful themes.

As the purpose of this article is to filter out lessons for future library development efforts, it will focus on the outcome of four of these projects – those in Myanmar, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Georgia – while touching on some key moments from the other ones.

Libraries must serve prominent national goals

In most cases, public libraries are already largely out of the national conversation, and are not in a position to help set the national agenda. Counting on the appeal of libraries for their intrinsic cultural value is no longer a viable advocacy strategy, and nor in most cases are selling points like supporting a 'reading habit' or providing access to books. Beyond Access demonstrated that to begin re-demonstrating relevance and utility, libraries must latch on to existing priorities, seeking to draw exposure and resources from high-profile programs, funding and political capital.

This means designing and adapting library programs that will fit into existing measurement systems through which policy-makers are already assessing development initiatives, and making a concerted effort to gather stories that can be useful in illustrating how libraries uniquely contribute.

For example, Beyond Access was able to help the library seize on such an opportunity in Myanmar, which was just entering the internet age as the program began. On paper, Myanmar boasted a vibrant public and community library tradition. The government itself operated over 400 public libraries at

the state, regional and district level, while also featuring more than 5000 community libraries registered under the Ministry of Information.

As no universal service fund was yet in place in Myanmar, telecoms were required to commit to expend some resources on public connectivity and training programs. IREX and its local partner nonprofit Myanmar Book and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF) advocated intensively for a new approach that used the existing infrastructure of libraries to introduce people to online services. The telecom Ooredoo was most receptive to the idea, and signed on to provide tablets and internet to more than 50 libraries as a pilot project. The library system was appealing to both Ooredoo and the Ministry of Information as a vehicle for people to learn about and experience the internet for the first time.

Having established this foothold at a time when no other institution had effectively claimed the internet on-ramp space, libraries became a magnet for information-for-development initiatives. Beyond Access partner MBAPF won grants from the Internet Society-Asia, Microsoft and Ooredoo to conduct the Tech Age Girls program. Having established the capacity to conduct technology training programs, libraries were an obvious venue for widespread information literacy training in response to a series of highly-publicized online rumor events, and Facebook began funding such an initiative in 2019.

In the Philippines, libraries had been left out of the national Digital Strategy in 2011, an exercise to define a strategy for leveraging technology for development. The Philippines had a long history of community-based internet initiatives, and was active in the telecenter community but these initiatives had largely excluded the Philippines 1100-plus public libraries. The Digital Strategy communicated a strong national commitment to public use of technology, establishing "a renewed vision for ICT and its use in transforming Philippine Society into a competitive force in the digital economy by the year 2016" (CICT, 2011, ii). It goes on to establish a set of priorities, first among which is "the development of e-Government . . . facilitating greater efficiencies and effectiveness in the delivery of basic social services and minimizing opportunities for corruption" (CICT, 2011, iii).

The strategy made resources available for projects achieving these goals, so Beyond Access focused on framing libraries' value and services around public technology and e-government. In one early success, the "Quezon City Public Library partnered with the National Bureau of Investigation so that people can learn how to register and complete clearances online. This is now the most popular service at the library. Other libraries throughout the country are helping people access applications for birth certificates, arrange passport applications, and verify their contributions to social services" (IREX 2015b, 2).

In Bangladesh, the national government had achieved the Millennium Development Goal of universal school enrollment, but the rapid expansion of schooling led to a decline in quality of education. A 2016 Save the Children

study found that 45% of primary school children could not read by the completion of grade 2. American donor agency USAID along with Save the Children prioritized early grade reading for a major 5-year investment in the country. Though Bangladesh had networks of public and community libraries, neither were originally included in the program. IREX designed an intervention in cooperation with Save the Children Bangladesh and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to mobilize 20 libraries near participating schools to support the literacy program.

The libraries focused on fulfilling the need for leisure reading. The program's baseline study found that "more than 40% of children don't have books other than religious texts at home" so the program responded by helping libraries stock "colorful, enjoyable, child-friendly books and providing access to interactive reading games on tablets" (Katz 2016). A monitoring system that tracked and measured the reading skills of children using the library versus those who didn't helped provide legitimacy to the approach and ammunition for advocacy materials.

In Georgia, a well-funded national access to information project was managed by the Public Services Development Agency under the Ministry of Justice, as part of its brief to increase public access to government services as committed to by the government in its accession to the Open Government Partnership. Among prospective Beyond Access countries, Georgia's government was perhaps the most open to cooperation and its government the most proactive. Library modernization fit neatly into the stated priorities of the government.

An agency official had attended the Beyond Access conference in Washington, DC in 2012. Her engagement ensured the cooperation of the Georgian government and its commitment of cost-sharing resources out of a project meant to extend government services to rural areas. With her help, the Beyond Access project in Georgia was designed to fit within this government program.

Technology's role

Beyond Access's experiences reinforced that technology is the hook through which outdated libraries in much of the world can become relevant again. The literature review section attested to the widespread lack of relevant resources at public libraries, and this was largely the case where Beyond Access began working. The Asia Foundation's library landscape survey in Myanmar found little association between libraries and computers. Only 11% of community members surveyed thought that computers belonged in libraries, and 99% of survey respondents "answered no when asked if free internet access would make their libraries more useful" (2014, 3–4). In Bangladesh, a baseline assessment found computers in no libraries other than the central public library in Dhaka. In the Philippines and Georgia, national libraries had not

established any cooperation with the many digital development initiatives administered and promoted by national governments.

These gaps provided a clear opening for Beyond Access to address. Librarians themselves, governments and then users could mentally bridge the gap between the present condition of libraries and one empowered with public access technology. Beyond Access sought to serve as a connector between library systems and national technology programs.

In Bangladesh, IREX took an alternative approach, seeking to integrate libraries as an asset for international development programs, with the idea that over the long-term, it would lead to a new funding stream and platform for exposure for library systems. An initial survey of global USAID-funded literacy programs over the past decade showed almost no mention of libraries, while tens of millions of dollars were invested in schools. IREX reached out to a series of large literacy-program implementing partners, and Save the Children Bangladesh responded with the most interest. As the organization administering a national-level early-grade reading program in the country, its staff were open to mobilizing community and public libraries in the country to supplement in-school reading instruction.

IREX and Save the Children provided tablets to participating libraries, seeing them as a durable and shareable technology that required much less need for training than a traditional computer. Tablets served both as a draw to get children into the library with a resource rarely available elsewhere in the community, and as a rapidly updatable literacy tool, taking advantage of the growing Bangla-language reading app environment. A program review explained the rational that "tablets provide novelty, excitement, and inter-activity that pulls children into the library and encourages the use of both digital and print materials" (IREX 2019, 8). A series of site visits in 2016 found that "many local children visit the library every day that it's open and children often gather in groups around books, reading games, and tablets" (Katz 2016).

In Georgia, the county foresaw that the Beyond Access project would "improve the level of civic engagement and capacity of local librarians through e-governance and modern technologies on the regional level" (OGGF 2014, 15). In Uruguay, Beyond Access connected the National Library with ANTEL – the country's telecommunications agency – for inclusion in a stage of its public technology access program. The project included 10 libraries for training, technology, and internet access, turning them into "digital inclusion spaces" (Escobar 2014).

The takeaway from these experiences is that when libraries are able to make a case to serve as the community hub for technology, the funding and resources are available. Making the case – and a concrete plan for technology adoption and dissemination – is the challenge. But there is no better institution than the public library in society to take the lead.

Training must be integral and extensive

As we saw in the literature review, in much of the world librarians are not prepared to offer the kinds of services that can make libraries relevant again. Observers note their outdated skills and lack of a customer-service orientation. Training is an essential part of library reform programs, but one-off trainings are insufficient to change long-embedded perspectives, habits and customs. Often librarians have had little access to professional development beyond the basic skills of cataloging.

Beyond Access found that training was the hardest part of the library development equation. As libraries have lost relevancy, they have lost appeal for talented new graduates in many countries. Library systems in each country where Beyond Access worked had capable staff but low expectations and lack of access to new skills had led to inertia for many librarians. Project training had to be tailored to each country and the project's theme, then tested, revised, then scheduled and administered for large groups. Modern learner-centered methodologies like group work, games, and discussions were frequently unfamiliar. Librarians with training experience were often scarce, so training-of-trainers had to incorporate basic pedagogical techniques and ample practice. Administrative barriers required time to negotiate, from allowing librarians to travel to training locations, to time off from regular work, to selecting the right participants.

In Bangladesh, when training invitations were initially issued, library directors and board members decided to participate themselves rather than sending the front-line librarians who interact with the public. As a result, much of the initial training content went unused by its participants, while those now expected to conduct new activities lacked the introduction to program materials and devices. Subsequent training invitations more strictly defined that the expected participants were librarians themselves.

All of these factors combined meant the training time from project startup to the point when services were being delivered on the ground was long, and could not be rushed. The training development and dissemination process was lengthy, but more critical was the follow-up to training. Faced with such new concepts as technology training, reading games or offering new government services, librarians were not able to immediately return to their libraries and implement new services. Turning the project concepts into on-the-ground services took intensive, personalized follow-up with librarians, taking the time to work through local obstacles and barriers. MBAPF – Beyond Access's Myanmar implementing partner – conducted regular regional 'peer learning meetings' to bring together previously-trained librarians and give them a chance to share their experiences. This professional networking worked as both an incentive to frequently-isolated librarians and a venue through which to learn from others. In Georgia, Beyond Access staff mentored new trainers from the Georgian Library Association, giving them the chance to first observe

training and then gradually take on more facilitation responsibilities in subsequent trainings.

Training techniques that the program employed to bring new concepts to librarians with minimal experience of prior professional development included:

- personas – borrowing a method from design thinking, training modules were built around profiles of typical community members. Most librarians were not accustomed either to designing services in response to user need, or to considering the different types of potential library users that might be present in their communities. In some trainings, pre-designed personas were including from which the training participants would work. In others, an early training activity asked participants to design their own personas based on their knowledge of the community.
- activity cards – Beyond Access provided concise, discrete one – to two-page descriptions of new library services and activities that translated training concepts into very specific step-by-step instructions for introducing the service. For example, a training on workforce development services at the library might include an activity card on assembling a job corner in your library.

Reviving library systems takes time

As Beyond Access was a development program funded by a donor, the inclination was to overpromise on results. As a grantee, IREX was not immune to this tendency and to some extent was excessively optimistic about the speed with which library systems would begin showing change. In the Philippines, an early promise by the national ICT agency to provide equipment to hundreds of libraries failed to materialize when government budget priorities changed. An initial project that had been planned around the assumption of those devices delivered had to be scrapped. The local partner organization, however, continued its conversations with libraries throughout the country and began building the program town by town, instead of one centralized nationally. The program then brought together the most engaged and innovative librarians, and started creating a movement that eventually spilled over into more of the library system. Having established a solid group of active librarians provided a platform on which to start a new initiative based on another national priority several years later, leveraging technology to create local language books, which complemented the national mother-tongue based learning school program. This project reached even more corners of the country, engaging dozens of libraries and partner schools in using easy software to creating thousands of leisure-reading books.

This outcome suggests the value of investing the time in generating a 'proof of concept'. While Beyond Access required co-funding to launch in any country, it

was often challenging to generate significant commitments until initial projects had already gotten underway. Libraries' general reputation as outdated and irrelevant presented a barrier to interest among funders, so the early steps of supporting libraries with technology, training, and specific goals on which to work paid off after time as demonstrations. Once there was a model which could be presented as evidence that libraries could make perhaps unexpected development contributions under the right conditions, potential co-funders could see they would get credit for something that genuinely worked and generated goodwill.

Relying on sources of funding beyond the program's grant did slow timelines. In Georgia, with funding for library renovation and training coming from national government programs, delays in releasing funds continually pushed back activities and results. Eventually, the funds were delivered as promised and later, partner Georgian Library Association applied for and received a grant from the President's fund that equipped more than 100 additional libraries with computers, and funded training for another 110 libraries (President of Georgia 2017). In all of these cases, patience was key – keeping the program moving while the gears of government slowly inched toward fulfilling their promises.

Not every project opportunity blossomed in a straight line. Increased government and donor interest in nonformal education in Myanmar convinced IREX to invest program funding in exploring opportunities for libraries to serve as venues for a large, national program seeking to reach out-of-school youth. The program conducted a survey and hosted a government roundtable on the topic. But funding delays and changes in policy direction dissipated interest in the topic and the push from the library side was lost as other priorities superseded. At the same time, there are signals when the program isn't working. In Nigeria, a promise of funding from the national universal service fund never materialized. In Peru, the National Library couldn't keep up with program commitments, and eventually that project had to be dropped.

Program management

While its focus was on reviving library systems, it is also worth sharing some of the lessons Beyond Access derived from testing a new approach to international development program management.

If there is one overarching observation that can be extracted from the Beyond Access experience when contrasted with other library development initiatives of the past, it is in the value of building on existing institutions and structures rather than building something from scratch. The library world is replete with examples of book donation and library construction initiatives that foisted outside resources and ideas on library systems. IREX managers made a conscious decision that Beyond Access would seek to equip local

library systems with the tools to respond to their own changing societies. This approach was reflected in a number of program facets:

- Local implementing partners were the face of the program rather than an international organization. IREX staff was based regionally and visited program countries regularly for monitoring, planning and key training sessions, but the program operated on a daily basis as a local initiative.
- Government was a central partner in every project. As a state institution, it was critical to not only integrate projects with the government department responsible for libraries, but to expand cooperation with libraries beyond to agencies that had never considered cooperation with libraries before. In many cases, these other government agencies funded library projects for the first time. Projects were started by aligning with government priorities and recalibrated alongside government partners as they progressed. Occasionally new themes emerged during the duration of the project – something that was only possible because of relationships already established.
- Identify and empower library leaders. Though it is a profession that has largely stagnated in many countries, there remain numerous library staff that seek to raise the profile and capacity of their institutions. Beyond Access was designed to give opportunities to these leaders at all levels and create a platform for them to transform the image of libraries, while documenting the impact that could be attributed to them. By promoting the achievements of key librarians, Beyond Access helped resuscitate the librarian profession as an appealing and impactful one. At the same time, it provided a new challenge for librarians who sought to break out of the traditional mold of library work.

Further research

To date, there has been little independent research on the effect of public library development programs in low – and middle-income countries. Zell and Thierry published an important evaluation of book donation programs (2015) that asked for a rethinking of this traditional approach toward 'helping' libraries in Africa. But there remain precious few, if any, independent assessments of programs. Participants in the Gates Foundation Global Libraries country-level programs, as noted in the literature review section, have published a series of studies exploring the impact evaluation and advocacy aspects of those programs. While valuable, these articles assessed library development programs on their own terms, rather than starting from the demands and expectations of the agencies required to continue funding libraries into the future. This article is similarly an account of someone who helped manage the program about which he is writing.

To date, library development efforts have attracted little interest from outside researchers. This is unfortunate, as such efforts represent institutional reform on a broad scale that has the potential to effect whole societies. But just as public perceptions tend to see public libraries as outdated and irrelevant, most social scientists from outside the library realm – Klinenberg excepted – have regarded libraries as unimportant to social change. Research on the ways reformed, modern libraries in the 21st century are impacting their communities is needed, especially as technology overtakes more and more social domains.

As state-supported disinformation expands, information literacy becomes an even more important skill for populations. Public libraries are the best positioned institution in many societies to address this need. Indeed, Beyond Access's partner in Myanmar is currently conducting a program on this topic using the library infrastructure. IREX is testing similar efforts in Ukraine, with promising early results. Research on whether properly trained librarians can effectively transfer such skills to societies would contribute to the body of knowledge about another important value of public libraries on a trending global priority.

Conclusion

Though the Gates Foundation has exited the field, public library development initiatives will continue to appear into the future, as they have every few decades over the last century. An increasing appreciation of social infrastructure coupled with the effects of decreasing public space suggest the potential for renewal of interest in an institution that has historically combined information, education and social connection. Andrew Carnegie at the start of the 20th century, UNESCO in the 1960s and 70s, and the Gates Foundation in the early aughts all came independently to the realization that public libraries were the best tool societies have for lifelong learning and community participation. Each time, these players put forth effort and resources to strengthen libraries' ability to respond to their communities' needs, and help library systems learn from each other about how to do that best. It will happen again. This article was meant to document the lessons learned by one small slice of the library development picture, in the hopes that future program managers can build on them rather than re-discovering them yet again.

The key lesson is that libraries can once again become part of the national conversation if they can seize on issues where libraries fit intuitively and follow up rhetoric by delivering with measurable results. When libraries can attract investment into training and technology, they can serve as a local hub for a wide range of development initiatives that require public participation, access to information and information literacy. The process takes time, attention to detail and patience, but its return on investment affects all corners of society.

Note

1. ICT4D was a term used in the international development field to cover the role of technology in achieving development outcomes, "Information and Communication Technology for Development". It was used interchangeably with 'ICTD'.

Notes on contributor

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