

How Can Community Organizations Accelerate Innovative Government Programs in Ghana?

As Ghana continues to invest in technology to improve its people's lives, the country's current network of public libraries are well positioned to support these initiatives. Ghana's 63 public libraries – located in each region of the country – offer existing infrastructure, trained information guides, and a safe community hub for development partners.

A Digital Focus for the 21st Century

Ghana is one of the leading countries in sub-Saharan Africa in the development of new technology tools and digital services. In 2003 the government adopted a new Information and Communication Technology for Accelerated Development policy framework to focus attention on access to technology, 21st-century skills development, and ICT infrastructure.

Today, new institutions such as the National Information Technology Agency (NITA) and the Ghana Investment Fund for Electronic Communications (GIFEC) are leading some of the most innovative efforts to implement these policies. International organizations are also focusing on Ghana's technology sector and seeking opportunities to support Ghana's social and economic development through technology and public access investments. These investments are opening up new opportunities and stimulating entrepreneurship and innovation.



PHOTO: BEYOND ACCESS

The Ghana Library Authority's mobile library service and ICT van regularly visits rural communities. In partnership with EIFL, the service provides people with an opportunity to acquire practical ICT experience and skills.

Still, not all of Ghana's people are benefiting from new digital resources. According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2011, more than 85% of the country's people still lacked access to the internet. This lack of access is pronounced in rural areas and for marginalized communities, particularly youth, who need to learn digital skills not only to succeed in school, but to learn about jobs and other opportunities. Despite a 100% mobile penetration, access is often unevenly distributed at the local

Ghana's 63 public libraries are part of the Ghana Library Authority, under the Ministry of Education. The library system includes regional libraries in each of Ghana's 10 regions.

level – excluding young users and women. This gap underscores the need to focus more on the people. While new digital tools offer the potential for people to improve their lives and communities, absent the ability to effectively translate information into usable knowledge, technology investments may lack lasting development impact.

Ghana's people need access to trained, committed staff as well as a trusted community place to fully reap the benefits of the government's new framework.

Ensuring Everyone Benefits from Ghana's Development

Today, the government is delivering on its commitment to access to technology and information through NITA and GIFEC, two agencies with a strong public commitment to expanding access. NITA is prioritizing a series of targeted eGovernment initiatives that will curb corruption, ensure transparency, provide improved access to government services, and promote civic participation. A 2012 commitment to fully join the Open Government partnership reflects a broader commitment to promote citizen-government engagement among the international community.

By supporting tangible public access projects with matching grant funding, GIFEC's portfolio of projects is increasing access to digital services and infrastructure for underserved populations. The agency has begun establishing Community Information Centers (CICs) in each of the country's 216 districts through a hybrid profit-making telecentre

Of the approximately 230 Community Information Centers planned, 100 are operating and 95 have internet. Two thousand computers have been delivered, but staff could benefit from additional capacity building to achieve their potential.

and non-profit community resource center model.

While the CICs point to a genuine commitment from the government, Ghana's experiment with subsidized public access technology will face challenges in identifying sustainable funding and skilled staff who can help less experienced users learn to use new technology. Community members need community hubs with staff and space that can provide broad access to information.

Building on What Already Exists: Ghana's Public Libraries

Ghana has already built and sustained a national network of public information hubs through its public library system, including a network of libraries that support the country's ICT for Accelerated Development Policy in two ways. First, they offer a network of truly public community spaces in each of Ghana's 10 regions that are already connected to local government, schools, and businesses. Second, the Ghana Library Authority's staff of 650 represents a professional class of trained information guides ready to help users translate information into new opportunities and skills for the people in their communities.

Among Ghana's people, there is a widespread, positive perception of the country's public libraries,

according to a recent study by EIFL (*Perceptions of Public Libraries in Africa*, 2011). People also believe that public libraries could best serve their communities if they were universally equipped with ICTs. With high levels of public trust and regard, Ghana's libraries are ideal partners for government initiatives, offering leverage and dissemination channels for health, employment, legal, education, and agricultural information.

Ghana's Libraries Serve Their Communities

While communities are looking to government agencies to enhance the value of public libraries through new partnerships and resources, there are already examples of innovation occurring through or in partnership with libraries:

Mobile ICT4D services

The Volta Regional library recently equipped a mobile library van with solar power and digital resources in partnership with EIFL and TechAide, an ICT4D social enterprise. The mobile van visits rural, underserved communities and provides those who would not otherwise have access with the chance to learn about and use technology.

ICT training and health information for youth.

The Northern Regional library partnered with Savana Signatures, a local ICT-based NGO, to offer ICT training and leadership skills to local youth. The library also offers space to NGOs and has helped coordinate an initiative that delivers health information to pregnant women via mobiles and radio. To support maternal health, the library created a Maternal Health Corner, offering free internet access on five computers to health workers and other community members.

Ghana's government builds successful partnerships with public libraries.

Through GIFEC, Ghana's government is already building effective partnerships with public libraries that can serve as a model for other countries. GIFEC's Library Connectivity Project provides matching technology support and equipment for public libraries across the

country and has already equipped each of Ghana's 10 regions with a mobile library van.

Recommendations for Libraries

Ghana's libraries could be an important asset in Ghana's information society strategy. Beyond Access recommends actions for both the library community and government to seize the opportunities of this existing resource.

Replicate existing innovative services.

Libraries in Ghana are already finding creative ways to initiate new services in their communities. By identifying and responding to communities' needs and creating partnerships with community, government, and private sector groups, these library innovators are leading efforts to reinvent the image of public libraries in Ghana. Libraries must recognize that new services and changes can often be implemented

without new funding or staff by redirecting existing efforts toward a priority project.

Seek opportunities to communicate the services they already offer to their communities.

Many people are not aware of the services public libraries currently offer in Ghana. Libraries should recognize that this lack of awareness means that renewed efforts to build public support, enthusiasm, and advocacy could generate considerable returns. By working with community groups, meeting with local government, and getting out into the community, libraries can build a coalition of support among their stakeholders.

Proactively seek to partner with government agencies.

Partnership opportunities with government agencies are available for those libraries with motivation and initiative. More libraries should take advantage of these opportunities by meeting with government

KEY ICT FOR ACCELERATED DEVELOPMENT PLAN OBJECTIVES »

- To promote an improved educational system within which ICTs are widely deployed to facilitate the delivery of educational services at all levels of the educational system
- To facilitate a wide-spread deployment and exploitation of ICTs within the society to support the delivery of health and social services
- To guide the development and implementation of electronic government and governance, as well as electronic commerce and business strategies and action plans
- To accelerate the development of women and eliminate gender inequalities in education, employment, decision making through the deployment and exploitation of ICTs by building capacities and providing opportunities for girls and women

From the Ghana ICT for Accelerated Development Policy

representatives and seeking to understand where libraries can support those priorities. In particular, libraries should take full advantage of existing opportunities.

Recommendations for Government

Identify opportunities to link Community Information Centers with libraries.

Where possible, the government should identify places in which libraries can partner with or house CIC resources. Library co-location represents a built-in sustainability strategy for CICs and provides an easy way for the government to reduce the costs of creating new institutions.

Consider policies that better integrate libraries into local development planning efforts.

While legislation that would decentralize the library system is still pending, the government should encourage policies that mandate integration of public libraries into local planning and development



PHOTO: BEYOND ACCESS

Rugged laptops from the Ghana Library Authority's mobile library service and ICT lab used to provide learning and access in hard-to-reach places.

efforts. Currently, many public libraries find themselves in an administrative limbo because they report to a central authority, while they are ostensibly responsible for local concerns. Transitioning library authority to the regional and local level would enable libraries and local administrations to better coordinate efforts and planning.

Leverage existing library infrastructure to meet Ghana's Open Government Partnership commitments.

As Ghana implements its OGP action plan, responsible agencies

and staff should consider the demand side of open government by ensuring that new information is made sufficiently available to those who lack private computer and internet access. Public libraries offer an ideal venue for publicity, training, and use of new open government resources.

Beyond Access is an initiative of IREX, EIFL, IFLA, Makaia, Facilitating Change, Development Gateway, the Asia Foundation, TASCHA, the Riecken Foundation, and READ Global, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

