

Empowering Farmers to Connect and Share through Libraries

Public Library “Radislav Nikcevic” - Jagodina, Serbia

In partnership with Electronic Information for Libraries (eIFL), Public Library “Radislav Nikcevic” in Jagodina county started the AgroLib-Ja project. They have sought to address the gap between government policy and practice and support agriculture in their community. By using public libraries to bring farmers in the villages of Jagodina together for workshops teaching new farming techniques as well as finding new resources and markets for their products, they have provided farmers the ability to improve their livelihoods.

New Technologies and Old Techniques

At the 2012 Beyond Access conference in Washington, DC, Beyond Access Members were challenged to come up with a short-term project that would, through public libraries, address a specific community need. As part of the Libraries for Development grant award opportunity, the winning project in each of five categories received a US\$10,000, one-year award to implement. The Jagodina Public Library team, with representatives from Public Library “Radislav Nikcevic” were selected to receive the economic opportunity award. Building on their previously-successful online outreach to farmers, the AgroLib-Ja



Jagodina residents learn basic ICT skills at a training in a local public library.

project sought to increase farmers’ ICT literacy as well as the availability of ICT resources in libraries throughout rural Jagodina. To do this, the project completed a number of activities:

Library Renovation and Equipping

The project targeted five villages for critical updates to the library infrastructure: Glavinci, Bagrdan, Bunar, Glogovac, and Major. Each of these five rural libraries was finally able to provide Internet access to its patrons; at the libraries where Internet access was newly added, an average of between 200 and 400 users accessed the Internet at each library every month. In Bunar and Glavinci, the project provided new computers, as well as other peripheral technology. In addition, the project updated the public library

agricultural resources relevant to the local community. Major opened a completely new library, with ICT equipment and agricultural support material included in its collection.

“I registered at the AgroLib marketplace and managed to sell 1 ton of pears. The buyer asked for more pears, but unfortunately my plantation is not that big. I hope I will expand the production”

BUILDING LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

On top of the Beyond Access grant, the Jagodina Public Library team developed a number of partnerships to support farmers in rural Jagodina both in the near- and long-term. Project partners include:

- Jagodina City Council
- The Agency for Small and Medium Enterprises and Registered Agricultural Households
- Local TV and Radio Stations
- Agricultural Cooperative "Prima Borovnica"

A Community Learning Center

In addition to providing a space for users to access content that they would not otherwise be able to, the five libraries in the AgroLib-Ja project leveraged their positions in the community as centers of knowledge to bring trainings and workshops to farmers in the area.

Through a series of 14 agricultural workshops held across the five project libraries, AgroLib-Ja reached 401 farmers on topics ranging from planting new crops such as blueberries, to bee-keeping and honey production, to safety practices in milk production. Those agricultural workers looking to deepen their technology skills underwent ICT training course. 28 farmers who had little technology experience in basic computer, Internet, and word processing skills completed the course.

Beyond the renovations and training sessions, the project sought to expand the AgroLib-Ja online marketplace - a forum where farmers and craftsmen can come together to share practices with one another and market their products. User feedback has been positive, indicating that the website has helped some users to sell their products.

Results and Future Plans

The AgroLib-Ja project took the first steps in working with farmers to alleviate poverty in rural Serbia. The workshops, trainings, and website also brought results for the farmers in

Jagodina. Following the conclusion of the program, a sample of 50 farmers were asked about their experiences with the trainings. Overall, the response from participants was positive, as indicated in the Key Results below. In Jagodina, public libraries have begun the process of bringing people together to share and seek new information. Recognizing the universal ability of public libraries to respond to community needs, the Jagodina library team are currently discussing potential paths to spread this program across Serbia with new partners.

KEY RESULTS

- 32% reported an increase in household income
- 95% reported they had used the online marketplace in the last year
- 1 in 3 reported growth in agricultural sales
- 73% responded that they either regularly or often used the information and techniques learned from the trainings

Beyond Access is an initiative of IREX, EIFL, IFLA, Makaia, Facilitating Change, Development Gateway, the Asia Foundation, TASCHA, the Riecken Foundation, and READ Global.

