LIBRARIES FOR THE PEOPLE – The Global Libraries Initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

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The Global Libraries Initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to improve people’s lives in developing and transitioning countries through useful, used, and sustainable public access to information and technology in public libraries. Given the important role libraries play in bridging information inequities, GL works to catalyze changes to have far-reaching effects, spreading the benefits to libraries everywhere.

Keywords: Public Libraries; Gates Foundation

Bibliotheken für Menschen – Die Globale Bibliotheksinitiative der Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation


Schlüsselwörter: Öffentliche Bibliotheken; Gates Foundation

Des bibliothèques pour tous les hommes – L’Initiative mondiale pour les bibliothèques de la Fondation Bill & Melinda Gates

L’initiative globale pour les bibliothèques de la Fondation Bill & Melinda Gates a pour but d’améliorer la vie des gens dans les pays en voie de développement ou d’émergence par un accès publique utile, utilisé et durable aux informations et à la technologie. Étant donné le rôle important que les bibliothèques jouent en surmontant les inégalités d’information, la Fondation travaille à catalyser les changements afin d’obtenir des effets de longue durée tout en soutenant des bibliothèques partout.

Mots-clés: Bibliothèques publiques; Fondation Gates

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0 Introduction

In a recent meeting, library colleagues from around the world told the staff of the Global Libraries initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that not enough people know about our work. Through this paper and further discussion with the library and information community, we hope to change that. And we hope through increased visibility that more librarians can benefit from our research and our lessons learned, as well as enhance their advocacy efforts: public libraries build strong communities.

At the Gates Foundation, the vision of the Global Libraries Initiative is to improve people’s lives in developing and transitioning countries through useful, used, and sustainable public access to information and communications technology in public libraries. Given both the power and necessity of information in the modern world, and the important role libraries play in bridging information inequities, the Global Libraries Initiative works to catalyze changes that will have far-reaching effects and spread the benefits to libraries eve-
anywhere. Through our efforts, we work to meet the needs of
users, train the people who work in libraries, and build public
support for libraries. Through our work with grantees, we
are seeing the difference strong libraries are making in their
communities. It is our belief that public libraries promote
information equity and literacy both as individual entities,
and as a force within cultures.

1 The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill
& Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead
healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, we focus
on improving people’s health and giving them the chance
to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the
United States, we seek to ensure that all people – especially
those with the fewest resources – have access to the oppor-
tunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in
Seattle, the foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and co-
chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and
Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

Abb. 1

The work of the foundation began between 1994-1997 as two
separate entities, the William H. Gates Foundation and the
Gates Library Foundation. In addition to the work in public
libraries, the focus included global health and community
needs in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Within
a few years the work of the foundation grew to include US
education. In 2006 the foundation was restructured into three
core areas to enable it to increase its strategic focus and
impact: U.S. Program, Global Health, and Global Develop-
ment. At that time the foundation’s libraries initiative split
into Global Libraries and U.S. Libraries. Global Libraries is
now part of the Global Development program.

In addition to Global Libraries, the Global Development
Program focuses on a limited number of areas with the poten-
tial for large-scale, sustainable impact, including agricultural
development, sanitation, and financial services for the poor.
The foundation is also working on a number of special initia-
tives including urban poverty and emergency relief.

Abb. 2

Most people aren’t aware that public libraries were the start
of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In fact, before there
was even a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, there was a
U.S. Library Program.

In 1997, after early success with the Microsoft Librar-
ies Online program, Bill and Melinda committed to con-
necting all U.S. public libraries to the Internet within five
years. In 1997 U.S. libraries looked very different than they
do today. Only about a quarter of U.S. libraries were con-
ected to the Internet, with some even charging users for
access. Additionally, there was an ongoing debate in the
library community about whether public access computers
even belonged in libraries, which were, at that time, almost
entirely about books.

But Bill and Melinda were concerned about inequity,
and it was increasingly clear in 1997 that the digital divide
was real and growing. After analyzing a number of poten-
tial intervention points (schools, community centers) they
decided that investing in libraries specifically was the best
way to reduce this opportunity gap.

Abb. 3

But why public libraries? First, access to information is the
core mission of public libraries. They are trusted institutions
that are open and available to all members of a community.
They are supported by the community and have steady, on-
going financial public support. And they have trained staff,
who see their role to help facilitate information access and in-
individual motto: “If you can reach a public library, you can reach the Internet.” It set out to make that a fact. Through the foundations work, all U.S. libraries were connected to the Internet for users; they remain so today. By the end of that phase of the program the foundation installed 47,000 computers in 11,000 libraries and conducted 62,000 trainings.

The foundation is a learning organization and the primary lesson learned was this: through this intervention, libraries in the U.S. were completely revitalized, becoming vibrant community resources. More importantly this effort fundamentally changed the expectation of what a library would provide. Public access to the Internet today is considered a core component of library services. Internally, the foundation also learned that without teaching advocacy and government engagement, there was no programmatic sustainability.

2000 was another important year for the foundation with the motto “Advancing efforts for greater public access to information – internationally.” It was the year that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was officially established, and it was also the year that the foundation’s investments in libraries began to grow outside the U.S. It was the first year that the Access to Learning Award (<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/atla/Pages/access-to-learning-award-brochure.aspx>) was presented with Helsinki Public Library receiving recognition as the first public library to provide free access to the Internet for library users.

In 2000 the foundation started the process of creating a library program outside the U.S., beginning with public libraries in Canada. The foundation was determined to replicate the impact seen in the United States in other countries. In 2001 and 2002 we made our first Country Grant to fund wide-scale implementation of a program to connect libraries and train librarians in Chile and Mexico.

2 Global Libraries, 2005-2008

In 2005, the foundation turned its focus to ensuring maximum programmatic impact. The foundation was growing very rapidly and it became more difficult for leadership to track the initiatives and efforts that were underway. Staff was asked to explain investments: How would each program lead to change in a sustainable and impactful way? A process of developing official strategies was approved by Bill and Melinda Gates that included allocated funding over a set amount of time. This strategy development process has two parts:

- A strategy document is developed by a program team. It outlines what goals will be accomplished over 3-5 years, the major actions needed to meet these goals, and the funding required.
- This strategy is presented to the co-chairs. If the strategy is approved, then a program team has the mandate to work and make grants within the goals and outline of the strategy.

In 2005 Global Libraries developed the first approved strategy, submitted to the co-chairs, which outlined the vision for public libraries in developing and transitioning countries.

The strategy focused on thinking about how to best approach potential opportunities. In it, the focus was on working in countries that had high need (a country that couldn’t connect its libraries on its own) and sufficient readiness (a country that could contribute and sustain the investment). Based on learnings from the U.S., Chile, and Mexico, Global Libraries outlined the most important elements for replication. The focus areas were impact assessment and advocacy. In addition, the strategy addressed issues of sustainability by understanding the total costs associated with program start-up and continuation.

Under the 2005 strategy, grants were approved to Latvia and Lithuania and work was initiated in Botswana, Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, and Vietnam. The 2005 motto was: “Narrow the digital divide through free public access computing in public libraries.”

To get a sense of the work underway in the country grants, the foundation created a short film to show the program in Latvia — “Strong Libraries Build Strong Communities”. More than anything this gives a sense of what happens when a country invests in public libraries: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/topics/Pages/latvia-public-libraries-computers-internet-connections-video.aspx>.

3 Global Libraries, 2008-2011

Global Libraries Initiative

![Image](Unauthenticated)

In 2008, Global Libraries went through a process to refine the strategy based on learning to-date. In addition to the key components from the 2005 strategy, there were two additional foci: first, “one size does not fit all” and, second, what larger library “environment” is needed to foster the success of libraries?

The strategy emphasized the need to consider the key components that we saw lead to successful and vibrant libraries around the world. These components are:

- **Libraries must meet the needs of their users** by offering: useful, relevant computer equipment and Internet access, content, and services; lifelong learning opportunities; and appropriate user training. These services must reach all users, including underserved, disadvantaged,
and marginalized populations. To meet the needs of users (and potential users), libraries must first understand their needs, and have the capacity and skills to develop and deliver appropriate solutions (or to catalyze development and delivery of appropriate solutions by others).

- **Library staff must be trained** to be effective in their central role in ensuring the success of the library and its public access program. Librarians help people find and use information, use information management tools, and create local content that can be used by others. They must also be skilled to manage the technology resources, engage with the communities they serve, conduct local outreach, and facilitate social inclusion. Library workers must have the capacity to sustain their libraries.

- **Libraries must offer an inviting public** space where people go to seek information and connect with their communities. They must be conveniently accessible and open to all demographic groups, services must be affordable (free or near-free), and the space must be sufficiently functional for day-to-day use with electricity, heat, and furniture.

- **Libraries must demonstrate their impact by measuring their contribution** to improving people’s lives and communities. Through a combination of data and stories, libraries need to show how they meet local needs and priorities in order to justify continued resources.

- **Strong library systems and supporting institutions are needed to serve the field** effectively, including library administrative units, library associations, and higher-education programs. These systems and institutions provide a vision for the field, serve as advocates, develop curriculum for library workers, create opportunities to leverage shared resources, and address other critical issues facing libraries and librarians.

- **Libraries must receive public support** from the government and their community of users to help ensure a funding stream over the long term and position themselves as active partners in community development. Tools for advocacy, measurement, and learning can be used to the advantage of librarians and library systems to help gauge success, understand setbacks, and tell their stories to stakeholders.

These components comprise what is referred to as the library “environment”. It was important to think about what was going on at the individual, user, and librarian level, the library building and system level, and the regional or national level. The 2008 strategy focused on the idea of the library environment to articulate what needed to be in place at a holistic level and then GL could think about how to fund efforts aimed at meeting gaps and needs in the library environment.

The learning leading to “one size does not fit all” was a realization at an experiential level that libraries throughout the world share many similarities, but they’re not all at the same stage of development with the same needs and opportunities. It was important to consider each country individually to determine where Global Libraries could be most effective. Additionally, there needed to be a mechanism to grant funds other than a large country grant. What worked in Latvia with a strong central directorate overseeing libraries was not going to work in Bulgaria with its nearly autonomous municipalities. What worked in Ukraine with 18,000 public libraries was not going to work in Botswana with 97.

In November 2008, Global Libraries received approval to revise its strategic approach. Under this 2008-2011 strategy, Global Libraries will continue a country-based grantmaking focus, but will also begin grantmaking centered on identified gaps in the library environment. The 2008 motto could be stated as: “Improve people’s lives in developing and transitioning countries through useful, used, and sustainable public access to information and communications technology in public libraries.”

### 4 Current Grantmaking Approach

#### Country Grants

Country Grants are the core component of Global Libraries’ strategy and account for the majority of our grants and effort. Country grants are defined as a multiple-intervention approach, supporting wide-scale implementation of public access computing and focused on a specific country or region within a country. These co-funded grants are generally in a planning phase for a year and then are implemented over 3-5 years, support wide-scale library computer and Internet installation, training, technical support, promotion, advocacy, and evaluation.

Country grants (with year awarded) include: Chile (2001), Mexico (2002), Latvia (2006), Lithuania (2007), Ukraine (2008), Poland (2009), Romania (2009), Botswana (2009), and Bulgaria (2009). Vietnam is currently in the planning stage for consideration of a country grant.

#### Environment Grants

Recognizing that not all potential countries need or are ready for a wide-scale program implementation, Environment Grants will fund opportunistic efforts aimed at meeting a gap identified in one or more of the six key components of a strong library environment (as noted above).

All potential grant opportunities will be analyzed to determine if there are any observed gaps within these six elements of the library environment. Although we will not
fund aspects of all areas, specifically we do not directly fund improving public spaces, and our funds will not reach every library directly, we believe that through supporting work that strengthens the library environment, benefits will reach the libraries that do not receive direct support from our grantmaking.

Environment Grants are generally between 2-3 years, and support targeted intervention in one or more of the six elements that libraries needed for sustained benefit either within a single country or within a region or issue/topic.

We see these grants as an opportunity to impact change at three levels: the individual, library and field level.

Country environment grants include: China (impact assessment).

Here are a few examples of issue/topic focused grants:

Read Global – In an effort to understand more about how to provide funding to organizations to replicate work, READ Global was awarded a $3M grant in 2007 payable over three years. Based in the U.S. and currently working in India, Nepal and Bhutan, the organization assists local communities to establish rural community-based libraries that serve as centers for information and learning, together with income-generating projects to financially sustain them. Using this grant as the basis to scale its efforts, READ Global is supporting the development of new libraries and country affiliates.

Public Library Innovation Program – In October 2009, GL awarded eIFL.net a $1.4m, 33-month grant to provide subgrants to encourage libraries, governments, and non-government organizations in approximately 50 countries to test new, innovative library services that use technology to meet users’ needs. Grantees will assess community needs and build partnerships to develop a program that meets those needs. eIFL.net will implement the program in three rounds specifically designed to allow for cultivation of innovative ideas and the replication of successful initiatives.

5 Looking Ahead

I’m excited about our strategy and the work the Global Libraries team does. I’m excited when I visit libraries around the world because I see substantial, positive change in libraries and the communities they serve.

Throughout the 30 years I’ve spent leading library systems in the United States and speaking internationally, I have seen countless examples of how libraries are unique in their ability to serve their communities. Through the passion and commitment of their staff, they can and do unlock a world of knowledge in a way that cannot be easily replicated by others.

2008 also saw subtle but key shift in our thinking from being focused on the library and the librarian to being focused on the library user. This shift has become the basis of our advocacy and evaluation work and is one of the components we are most excited to share with the field. Libraries need to plan for and measure this and they need to shout that fact from the rooftops. We refer to this as our “impact measurement”.

Public access to information and communications technology and a strong library environment will help libraries serve more people, more effectively. Global Libraries’ investments in library capacity, library systems, and library-supporting institutions will help make libraries more effective and sustainable, so they can improve and extend the services they offer. There is evidence that public access to computers increases general library usage. Strengthening capacity allows libraries to manage the increased demands from more users. This includes: training staff for new or increased responsibilities; implementing policies to manage technology use; and preparing the library for increased use.

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As importantly, libraries have a long-standing place in society that allows them to serve as a safe haven for all members of marginalized communities. Libraries are often the
only places for communities to gather, and the only institution with the mandate to serve the public free of charge.

It is relatively easy to refurbish a storefront, buy a computer, connect it to the Internet, and turn it on. But we’ve seen that these relatively simple solutions often fail. Considerable thought, planning, and follow through is required if we want all members of society to benefit from on-line services. Libraries, in the eyes of Bill and Melinda Gates, are the best intermediaries for ensuring that this value is accessible to all members of society on a sustainable basis.

This is what you, our colleagues in Germany, and all of our partners around the world, experience each day. You understand the impact libraries have on all levels of society.

There are countless stories in our program: they include the Romanian librarian who helped nine local students get educational scholarships, and the Latvian and Romanian mayors who, even in tough economic times, decided that investing in libraries provided more value to their communities than investing in fixing the main road through town. Then there are the farmers in Ukraine who now know when to take their product to market, and how to find parts to repair their equipment.

In fact, the President of Latvia, who visited us in Seattle last year, told us that even in the face of a severe economic hardship, his decision to invest in libraries was an easy one, given the obvious benefits it provided for the future of his country’s citizens.

In Lithuania, new lively library buildings are opening and Library 2.0 is thriving. In Bulgaria and Poland, again, in spite of the tough economic times, mayors and community leadership have made the decision to invest in improving their libraries.

In Global Libraries we hope to build stronger partnerships across the private and public sectors, and speak up for libraries everywhere, not only in transitioning countries. We hope our work and research in the library environment, and especially our work with impact and advocacy can make a difference for libraries everywhere.

Libraries can and do change lives. But it takes all of us, working together, using our voices loudly and powerfully. We must learn to speak more strongly about libraries, about our impact, and our importance. And while this might seem simplistic, we do not talk enough about how the public library is the only institution or place that promotes the value of equitable access.

I strongly believe there is no time better than now to be a librarian. We are, if committed, able to radically transform and reinvent libraries. Right now, people desperately need information and technology and there is no institution better suited to do this work than libraries. This is the moment to renew, revitalize, and transform ourselves and our libraries. And through that revitalization, people will understand that libraries are indispensable.

We also have the opportunity to change the image of libraries, and raise respect for our work, which will lead to better sustainable funding and eventually to serving more people in deeper ways. Imagine for a moment what life will be like when we unlock and unleash the potential of libraries.

This is our time; together, let’s make the most of it.