



knowledge without boundaries

# *AgroLib-Ja – Improving the lives of farmers*

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Jagodina, Serbia

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*Farmer Dejan Stankovic is advertising his produce on the AgroLib website.*

*This case study is based on information provided by the Public Library Radislav Nikčević in March 2011. EIFL-PLIP has edited the information for the Public Library Innovation Programme (PLIP) project replication process.*

## SUMMARY

### INNOVATIVE IDEA

Bringing together organizations and experts involved in agriculture through a network of rural libraries, and using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to improve farming methods and increase farmers' income.

### THE PROJECT

The project, titled AgroLib-Ja, has revitalized four rural libraries and created a network of libraries that provide information and communication services especially for farmers. The project is coordinated by the Public Library Radislav Nikčević. The four rural libraries have been renovated and equipped with computers. They train farmers to use ICT to research farming methods and to advertise their produce. They also regularly host lectures by agricultural experts and local government officials.

### KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Winning farmers' trust and changing attitudes to the libraries and to ICTs.
- Successfully renovating four rural libraries and equipping them with computers, Internet connections and printers.
- Training librarians and farmers to use the Internet.
- Creating and launching a website for AgroLib [www.agrolib.rs](http://www.agrolib.rs) and an online market for farmers [www.agrolib.rs/pijaca/](http://www.agrolib.rs/pijaca/).
- Hosting lectures in the four libraries in partnership with agencies of the Ministry of Agriculture and local self-government representatives.
- Extensive and creative marketing, through mass media, making films and distribution of business cards to farmers.
- Winning a grant of US\$7,150 from the Ministry of Culture to extend AgroLib-Ja.



*Information technology training – village librarians learn new skills so that they can train farmers*

### INTRODUCTION

In the municipality of Jagodina there are 52 villages. Demographic data shows us that urban and rural populations are balanced. There are about 35,580 people in the town of Jagodina and another 35,300 in the rural villages – a total population of about 70,900. However, over many years there has been more investment in the town and the villages have remained disadvantaged and marginalized.

While farmers have remained impoverished, new information technologies have improved livelihoods in other parts as Serbians adjust to e-business methods. For a long time, technical barriers meant most Serbian villages had no access to the Internet. Today, there still are many villages where it is difficult or even impossible to access the Internet. Important information intended for farmers does not reach them because they cannot use the Internet, and most do not even have a computer.

The network of rural libraries in the municipality of Jagodina is very wide, and the libraries have in the past played an important role as cultural and social centres in community life. In recent years, they lost this function and shared the fate of the villages. They became places where dust was collecting, and new books had not been bought for years. Many rural libraries were closed and books disappeared or were kept in poor conditions. Officially, the Public Library from Jagodina supervises the work of 16 local libraries in the municipality of Jagodina, but many rural libraries existed in name only.

To help farmers, the government has opened a number of agencies in cities to coordinate work with farmers. However, employees in these agencies were based in the cities. Library standards, meanwhile, recommended that local branches of rural libraries should have funds and facilities to suit the needs of local populations. With all these developments and issues in mind, the Public Library Radislav Nikčević conducted research to identify the needs of rural people. The AgroLib project grew as a result of this research.

Since most rural people are farmers, and the target group of our project is farmers, we agreed that the ideal place for us to implement the project was rural libraries. Public libraries are places that provide services to meet community needs. Activities include literary evenings, educational lectures and workshops, exhibitions, literary competitions, book promotions, and many others. Library standards in Serbia recommend that libraries should become partners with other public and private organizations and institutions to carry out their role and to improve services.

Through AgroLib, we wished to overcome the traditional idea that libraries are places where you work with books, and to modernize library activities. People trust the library. The profession of librarian has been affirmed in recent years, but there has been limited financial support for library reform and library development.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Aims

To improve villagers lives, modernize farming and increase farmers' income through:

- Increasing information literacy of farmers and librarians;
- Training of librarians to provide services within AgroLib;
- Professional education for farmers – agricultural books and magazines, and lectures and discussion sessions;
- Providing Internet access as a source of information and knowledge;
- Creating a website for farmers, and free advertising of agricultural products and services on the website;
- Revitalizing rural libraries – transforming them into information centres for rural communities, where people can meet, exchange experiences, learn and find information.



*Farmer Dejan Stankovic's grandmother uses an old family recipe to make cheese. The cheese is now advertised on the AgroLib website and is attracting buyers.*

### Target group

Primary users are farmers from 52 villages near Jagodina, to whom the services are available through the revitalized network of rural libraries. Through the AgroLib-Ja project, the libraries in Bunar, Bagrdan, Glogovac and Glavinci have been revitalized to become library information centres. [Initially, the AgroLib-Ja was intended to benefit five libraries; however, we found it was technically impossible to connect the library in Deonica to the Internet.]

### Outreach strategies

- Complete adaptation and renovation of the library facilities in the four villages;
- Restitution of the existing book fund and acquiring serial and monographic publications from agricultural domain;

- Equipping village libraries with computers;
- Setting up the Internet and providing free access for all users;
- Forming and setting up the website [www.agrolib.rs](http://www.agrolib.rs) to present the project and to provide information, and the Internet market [www.agrolib.rs/pijaca/](http://www.agrolib.rs/pijaca/) within the website for advertising farmers' produce, crafts and village tourism;
- Information Technology (IT) training for farmers and village librarians;
- Professional lectures and discussion on various fields of agriculture.

## IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

### **Adapting library facilities and winning farmers' trust**

We began by adapting the library facilities, which took time and caused some delays. Also, we found that farmers' fear of the unknown and information illiteracy meant that we had to promote information training through meetings with farmers and mass media campaigns. The first project users were of great help in attracting new users, their neighbours, friends and people from nearby villages.

### **The role of rural librarians**

Village librarians played an important role in introducing the project to farmers and to rural people. The success of the project depended on the engagement and reputation of rural librarians.

### **Active partners**

Active engagement of all partners increased use of AgroLib. It also led to increased use of our partners' services. For example, the administrative board of the Agency for Small and Medium Enterprises and Registered Households highlighted the role of the AgroLib project in increasing numbers of registered households in the municipality of Jagodina.

### **Adapting to village culture and life**

In the beginning, we planned identical project activities for all four villages, but quickly we realized that each village is different. We had to learn to adapt to the cultural patterns and customs of each village.

For example, we initially planned our first lectures in the evenings, after farmers had already worked hard in the fields, many for longer than 10 hours a day. We soon realized that after a long day in the field, and evening livestock feeding, no-one would come to the village library – no matter what we were offering! We therefore postponed some activities to months when working in the fields was less, and when farmers would be less exhausted and have more free time.

We learnt when religious patron days were celebrated in certain villages and about other religious holidays. We avoided organizing lectures during big sports events which would keep most men at home watching TV.

### **Marketing – mass media and business cards**

We publicized each activity through print and electronic media – mostly local media, but also some national media. As a team we were engaged to the maximum supporting farmers to use the AgroLib online marketplace, creating users' profiles, filming short

promotional videos about successful farmers and organizing training, lectures and other project activities.

As time went by, because of these activities, villagers' trust in our work grew. They began attending more lectures, to learn new ideas from professional agriculturalists and to meet partner organizations. Appearing in the news of a local television station soon became a matter of prestige for the farmers.

Because advertising is very expensive in Serbia, we came up with the idea of making business cards for our AgroLib online market users. Each business card is a unique advertisement for both a user and AgroLib. In addition to information about the farmer, each business card carries the AgroLib logo. Business cards are not expensive, but they are a symbol of respect and attract attention. They represent farmers as serious business people and advertise agriculture. Our farmers visited numerous agricultural fairs, where they gave out their business cards. These fairs attracted visitors from neighbouring countries, and our farmers' produce and the AgroLib project are now promoted internationally.

We also marketed our work through brochures and product labels.

## STRATEGIES, TACTIC, AND TOOLS

### Partners and local support

The **town assembly of Jagodina** gave financial support for adapting and renovating the four village libraries. They also enabled the public library in Jagodina to work in three village libraries, and librarians were employed in the other two. They allocated funding for books. In this way, they contributed to sustainability of AgroLib beyond the project period funded by EIFL-PLIP. To see how the town assembly supports the project, visit

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za\\_KAayRVKQ&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za_KAayRVKQ&feature=related)

The **Ministry of Agriculture** through its **Rural Development Support Network** provided technical and administrative support and help in educating farmers. We established an excellent relationship with the Network representative, who helped encourage farmers to attend lectures on agriculture. Each time the Network representative took part in lectures and panel discussions, farmers learnt more about important regulations, grants, competitions and significant agricultural loans provided by the Ministry. The representative of the Network was an important intermediary between farmers and the AgroLib team for creating profiles on the AgroLib market. To see the more about this valuable partnership, watch

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4vHzLjDLLA>

*'The project AgroLib totally fits the purpose and work of the agency I work in. In fact, the idea is for libraries to become information centres, not only places where books can be borrowed. And some problems in our work are solved. It is easier to come to the village library and talk to current and future farmers.'*

-Representative of the Rural Development support Network of the Ministry of Agriculture.

The **Agency for Small and Medium Enterprises and Registered Households** provided assistance in registering farms and for our education programme. The representative of



the Agency attended and observed each professional lecture organized in the village libraries. Each time the villagers and farmers were informed about current measures of local and federal government to support rural life.

The representative of the Agency was a mediator between local self-government and farmers, helping solve many problems. Through the involvement of the director of the Agency in the AgroLib-Ja project, transport for the International Beekeeping fair in Belgrade was organized. As a result, beekeepers from a beekeeping association, Pcelar, from Bagrdan, took part in the fair in Belgrade for the first time. Through participating in AgroLib-Ja, the Agency significantly increased the number of users of local self-government services, and noted this in their reports to their board. For more information: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UkbimYT0zc&feature=mfu\\_in\\_order&list=UL](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UkbimYT0zc&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL)

### Staff training

We successfully trained village librarians to use computers. The first part of the training included the basics of the Windows environment, file and folder work, copying, cutting and pasting objects. Then, librarians were trained to open webmail accounts, to use Skype and to register and use social networks and forums, depending on their needs and interests. They were also trained to help farmers to use these services.

### Equipment, technology

We set up Internet connections in all four libraries, Bagrdan, Bunar, Glavinci and Glogovac, and installed two computers and one printer in each library.

### Website for the project and for farmers

We set up the website [www.agrolib.rs](http://www.agrolib.rs) about the project, and within it, the Internet market [www.agrolib.rs/pijaca/](http://www.agrolib.rs/pijaca/) to advertise farmers' work, produce and handicrafts.

## KEY BENEFITS

The attitude of the rural population and farmers towards the library and ICT has changed. Farmers have become members of village libraries and have started using the Internet service, books and magazines on agriculture, and services of the AgroLib market for advertising their products. They also now regularly use other agricultural websites.

***'You should know that when you are on the Internet, the whole world can see you. I remember one old saying that my late grandfather taught me. That is, 'good voice reaches far distances'.'***

- Mata, from Jagodina, speaking about the benefits of the Internet. Mata was the first farmer to advertise his farm produce and crafts on the AgroLib website.

Other citizens – especially the youth – have benefited from the project. Young people are using textbooks for primary and secondary schools that the library bought, and have started using the free Internet. Even though they were not our target group, young people have become special beneficiaries of the project. There are very few cultural and educational events in their villages for young people, so the libraries have become their favorite places.

The Public Library Radislav Nikcevic in Jagodina has benefited through renovation, and its reputation has been enhanced. Until 2010 there were no members who were farmers; now there are 46 farmers who

have joined. As a result of the AgroLib website and market, farmers regularly come to the library for information or for mediation in solving problems. Similarly, the village libraries have been renovated, and numbers of members of the village libraries have increased.

We trained 59 farmers, four village librarians and one project partner to use ICT. Because the aim of the training was to enable farmers to learn new ways of communicating, training focused on the Internet. It included the basics of working in a Windows environment, working with files and folders, copy, cut and paste facilities, Web and e-mail and using search engines to look for agricultural information. Farmers are now familiar with a variety of agricultural sites.

For more about AgroLib's benefits and successes, watch our videos:

For our work with Beekeepers-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UkbimYT0zc&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLxhLHWZIRq&feature=related>

For our work with Quince farmers-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWbGt54pXTw>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uczb-yC4OWc&feature=more\\_related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uczb-yC4OWc&feature=more_related)

For our work with livestock farmers-

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44MZ-cNN6xl&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44MZ-cNN6xl&feature=player_embedded)

## LESSONS LEARNED

### **Personal contacts**

One of the main reasons for our success was establishing personal contact with farmers. It is easier to explain and recognize a good idea through personal communication. Therefore, we recommend as many personal contacts as possible. We mostly used lectures at the library to meet farmers – but we even visited farms and households to promote the project, and these visits were also very important. Once you have won the confidence of one group of farmers, they will recommend to others.

### **Selecting rural librarians with care**

Rural librarians are the most important link between the farmers and library for promotion and implementation. Therefore, it is desirable that the village librarian is a person who has a good reputation and who actively participates in social and cultural life of the village.

### **Adjust to meet community needs**

Initially, working hours in all four libraries were four hours, and librarians' shifts varied. To accommodate farmers, we adjusted our hours to be sure that we were open in the mornings and on market days. To suit school children, we opened the library after school hours. Since the adjustment, both visits and membership have increased.

### **Farmers' information literacy**

We realized that farmers did not know how to find current professional knowledge to improve their farming methods. It also took time for librarians to explore the different kinds of agriculture in different villages. To solve these problems, we organized expert lectures



and discussions especially for each village. Professional lectures were the first place for farmers to learn and to ask questions. After each lecture, we noticed that farmers asked questions about specific problems. We also noticed that farmers wanted both theoretical and practical knowledge.

### **High speed Internet connection**

For the success of the project, it is necessary to provide high speed Internet connections to facilitate training and so that users are not frustrated.

### **Time**

Our experience shows that one year is very limited to show impact of the online market, which can be built up and promoted over a few years.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

We made many interesting and useful contacts who will be of benefit to AgroLib and who will continue to support the project after the EIFL-PLIP period. The local self-government of Jagodina is especially interested in continuing with the work, as demonstrated by their willingness to renovate the library and to invest in infrastructure, staff and funding. Farmers continually encourage us to continue.

We will continue active cooperation with our partners, keeping contact with successful farmers and reaching out to others; organizing lectures and IT training, and updating book funds in rural libraries. We will continue advertising rural libraries as information centers in their local communities.

*\* In April 2011, shortly before publication of this study, the Public Library Radislav Nikčević received news that it has won a grant of RSD 500,000 (about US\$7,150) from the Ministry of Culture to extend its AgroLib-Ja project.*