TRANSFORMING PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN UGANDA

EIFL partnership with the National Library of Uganda accelerates digital inclusion

> "With EIFL, we have come a long way in building the ICT capacity of public and community libraries and connecting communities in Uganda. Our libraries across the country are now recognized as key local contributors to development and digital inclusion."
>
> – **ADONIA KATUNGISA, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF UGANDA**

In 2010, an EIFL study of perceptions of public libraries in Uganda found that most people saw libraries as places for storing information, quiet reading and study. Very few public or community libraries had computers or internet connections for public use and librarians' digital skills were limited.

Today the picture is very different. Equipped with digital technology, and staffed by librarians with digital information and training skills, public and community libraries are playing a vital role in digital inclusion, especially in under-resourced rural and peri-urban areas. Providing free or affordable access to ICT and digital literacy training are now recognised as essential public library services that are attracting thousands of people from all walks of life— farmers, students and their teachers, vulnerable and unemployed women and youth, health workers, police and government officials.

This transformation has been remarkable, and EIFL is proud to have played a part in it.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Communities across Uganda are served by over 150 public and community libraries. The National Library of Uganda (NLU) sets policies, standards and guidelines for these libraries, advocates for resourcing of libraries, and provides training for librarians. From early on the NLU has been our main partner in working with libraries in Uganda.

In 2012, guided by the findings of the EIFL study, 'Perceptions of Public Libraries in Uganda', EIFL and the NLU embarked on a strategy to change government and public perceptions of public libraries. The strategy combined three elements: developing new library services using ICT to serve community needs; building the capacity of librarians to use ICT effectively in services and training, and an advocacy campaign that specifically targeted national government ministries and agencies.

Between 2012 and 2015, EIFL provided small grants to support seven public and community library projects that introduced ICT into services targeting farmers, unemployed young people and rural women. Short case studies based on the projects, showing the impact of ICT-enabled public libraries, have been helpful in changing perceptions of key stakeholders.

Our capacity building initiative, starting in 2014, targeted libraries that already had or that were about to receive computers and internet connections for public use. Our aim was to ensure that librarians were ready to use their new equipment effectively, and the training curriculum included basic and advanced ICT skills for librarians, new service development and management skills, and training and facilitation skills.

EIFL and the NLU used mounting evidence of the positive impact of ICT in public and community library services in advocacy at the national level to improve resourcing of libraries. Over time, this worked, and doors began to open. In 2018 the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), the government agency mandated to develop a modern communications sector in Uganda and to expand rural communications, agreed to support a small pilot project that involved equipping three public and community libraries with computers and internet connections for public use.

The pilot project, with Pallisa Public Library in Eastern Region, Hoima Public Library in Western Region and Nakaseke Community Library in Central Region, was a success. It led to the formal inclusion of public and community libraries in annual ICT roll-outs funded by the Uganda Communications Universal Service and Access Fund (UCUSAF), which is managed by the UCC. In relation to this, EIFL and the NLU committed to ongoing training of librarians at newly-equipped libraries to ensure that the equipment would be integrated into services.

From 2019 onwards, public and community libraries received annual allocations of digital technology from the UCC. By the end of 2024 the UCC had installed packages of digital equipment at 39 public and community libraries, and 30 more libraries have been earmarked for the UCC's roll-out in 2025. The UCC equipment packages are comprehensive: each library receives 10 computers, plus wireless internet, a printer, a scanner and a photocopier.

"Over the next five years, the UCC's strategic plan focuses on enhancing ICT infrastructure in approximately 100 public and community libraries. We believe this will help bring ICT access to underserved and vulnerable communities, including the elderly, people with disabilities, and low-income populations. We are also very happy to see libraries actively conducting digital skills training for local communities," said James Beronda, Director of UCUSAF at the UCC.

MAJOR NATIONAL PROJECT

In 2021, EIFL and partners, including the NLU and the Uganda-based NGO Maendeleo Foundation, launched a new national project, 'Digital skills and inclusion through libraries in Uganda'. This project included more libraries that had received equipment from the UCC. It trained librarians from 27 libraries serving urban, peri-urban and rural communities to build digital skills of two especially marginalized groups— women and unemployed youth. Skilled librarians provided training in digital and mobile literacy and introduced trainees to free online learning opportunities.

"We use ICT training to introduce useful online resources such as courses, tutorials and YouTube videos. This allows people to learn new skills and generate income or diversify what their business can offer," says Peter Balaba, a librarian at Nakaseke Public Library.

In just two years, 50 librarians and library volunteers from the 27 libraries provided digital and mobile information literacy training, covering basic ICT skills, internet searching, digital marketing, Google tools and online safety, to over 22,000 people. Of these, 1,500 enrolled for online courses on topics including entrepreneurship, computer coding and web design, repairing digital equipment, hairdressing and tailoring.

Libraries reported receiving requests for ICT training from government departments, police, health service providers, schools and other local institutions. "The fact that our local authorities value the training programme in the library so highly influences the community to see it as a valuable activity that can help them in future. The leaders do mobilization

in various communities urging people to take part in the training; parents also appreciate the services, and there is a lot of excitement in our community," said Mathew Olowo, Librarian at Bugiri Public Library in Uganda's Eastern Region.

LIBRARIES MAKING A LASTING IMPACT

Public access ICT and training are making a lasting impact in communities. Library trainees are using their new ICT skills to start small businesses, find jobs, get promoted, research the internet for ideas and information, study further and learn new technical and craft-making skills.

Kawempe Youth Centre, Central Region

To improve her performance in ICT at school Nattembo Hadijjah joined the digital skills programme at Kawempe Youth Centre during the holidays. "We were supported with digital knowledge and equipped with hands-on computer skills which I later-on applied in my academics and final computer examinations. I am happy and proud that thanks to this training I was able to successfully pass my ICT exam with a distinction."

Kabale Public Library, Western Region

The ICT trainer at Kabale Public Library, Omuntuwabantu Mutahunga Bana, told us that one of their trainees is using skills that he learnt online to repair computer equipment, like screens and mice, and domestic items, like irons. The young man, Martin Kakuru, works part time at a small shop where he generates income by taking in items for repair.

Pallisa Public Library, Eastern Region

Another librarian and trainer, Stella Amuleni from Pallisa Public Library, spoke about 20 keen young potters who completed digital literacy training at the library and researched the internet to find new pot designs and learn new potting methods. "They were used to making just one type of pot. Now they have started to make pots in different shapes and colours."

Koboko Resource Centre, Northern Region

Koboko Resource Centre has helped Brenda to change her life. Brenda left school due to pregnancy in 2020 and her parents could not support her to continue her studies. She enrolled for basic ICT training at her local library and completed the course. Afterwards, Brenda joined a group at the library studying a free online course for a certificate in hair care, make-up, and beauty. "This course changed her life, and she now works in a beauty Salon in Koboko Town, earning a salary," says librarian Peterlee Guma.

A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The new energy in public and community libraries has attracted partnerships in the private sector. Absa Bank Uganda, American Tower Corporation (ATC) Uganda, MTN and Airtel Uganda have partnered with NLU by donating computers and internet connectivity to libraries and in some cases renovating and furnishing library buildings to accommodate digital community spaces. ATC Uganda has also included libraries in their Digital Communities programme and engaged librarians to provide ICT training for communities on a regular basis.

"We cannot overestimate the good partnership and strong contribution of the UCC and other development partners, like EIFL, without which we would not have achieved this level of ICT resourcing. Public and community libraries are now recognized as partners in achieving national, regional and international development goals for universal access to information and ICT. And we are attracting new partners and partnerships. This growing network of support strengthens our ability to reach even more people and communities," said Adonia Katungisa, Director of NLU.

Thank you to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Wehubit Programme implemented by the Belgian development agency, Enabel, for supporting the work of the EIFL Public Library Innovation Programme in Uganda.

EIFL'S WORK WITH PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN UGANDA —

2010 Commissioned research, 'Perceptions of Public Libraries in Uganda'

2011 Released findings of 'Perceptions of Public Libraries in Uganda'

2012 Awarded grants to seven public and community libraries to develop ICT-based community information services to meet the needs of farmers, health workers and young job seekers in their communities

Advocacy campaign for government investment in library ICT

2014 Launched capacity building initiative for 22 public and community libraries

2016 EIFL and the National Library of Uganda (NLU) sign MoU to collaborate on public library modernization and ongoing training of librarians at newly-equipped libraries

2018 Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) agrees to provide digital technology to three public libraries, as a pilot project

2019 Four NLU staff members complete EIFL train-the-trainers programme and are involved in continuing professional development of librarians

Formal inclusion of public and community libraries in UCC's Uganda Communications Universal Service and Access Fund (UCUSAF) Phase III programmes

UCC equips 11 more public and community libraries

2020/ 2022 UCC equips 18 more public and community libraries

2021/ 2023 With partners implemented a national library project focused on digital literacy for women and unemployed youth. The project trained 50 librarians and library volunteers to provide ICT training in their communities. 27 public and community libraries provided digital skills training to 22,000 people; 1,500 people completed online courses, learning skills that would change their lives

2024 UCC equips 10 more public and community libraries

UCC earmarks 30 more libraries for 2025 digital technology roll-out

EIFL maintains a virtual peer-learning network of public library trainers from Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Uganda and Zambia

STAY CONNECTED

f **eifl.net**

X **@EIFLnet**

in **eifl-net**

eifl 2024 ANNUAL REPORT