



What we learned from 3 years of connecting communities to technology

In 2013, Myanmar stood on the edge of unprecedented change in access to information technology within the country. Mobile phone penetration was at a mere 7% but would increase to 85% in the next two years. This rapid expansion opened opportunities but also raised a lot of questions. How would communities first gain access to this technology? How would they learn the skills to use the technology? How would they navigate a rapidly changing environment?

So, in 2014, IREX initiated a partnership with the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Fund (MBAPF) and launched an effort to create a network of community technology hubs throughout Myanmar. Now, in 2016, this partnership has transformed 90 libraries to serve as safe places for diverse communities to access the internet and gain critical digital skills.



Why libraries in Myanmar?

Rather than create a new network of tech hubs, IREX looked at what existing community institutions could support this rapid digital transition in the country. A library landscape survey conducted by The Asia Foundation in 2013 showed that Myanmar has a network of 5,000 libraries. These libraries are trusted community organizations and are known as traditional centers for information and learning.

Myanmar communities need safe spaces with guides that can help navigate the rapidly changing ICT environment, and Myanmar's libraries are well positioned to transform into a new role supporting communities to address these needs.





How did we create a network of community technology hubs?

Stage 1

Train librarians to manage public access technology and develop new services that focus on digital skills training

Equip libraries with tablets and mobile internet connections

Build a community of practice for these libraries turned community technology hubs

Stage 2

Libraries create an enabling environment for self-guided and peer-based skills development

Libraries actively engage communities and offer skills training

Stage 3

Diverse sections of communities have access to technology and opportunities for skills development that they may not be able to access elsewhere



Study Approach

In order to better understand the impact of this approach IREX worked with an external evaluator, EnCompass, to conduct a two-phase evaluation. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach. The evaluation was conducted in two phases with evaluation trips in July 2015 and July 2016. During these trips evaluators used key informant interviews and focus groups to capture qualitative data on project impact. The evaluation also incorporated quantitative project monitoring data collected between January 2015 and July 2016. The evaluation focused on identifying what worked within the intervention in order to inform practical lessons learned that can be applied by IREX and other implementers.

Total Project Libraries



35 urban

39%



55 rural

61%



Sample



3 urban

50%



3 rural

50%

Magway
Mandalay
Sagaing
Yangon



What did we learn?



Community tech hubs are in demand even as ownership of personal devices increases

A steady increase in library visits points to ongoing demand for public access

Library visits have steadily increased over the life of the project and have almost doubled, increasing from an average 400 visits per month to 745 visits. This 86% increase in library use corresponds not only with the addition of technology and internet at the libraries but also with the increase of access to technology and internet more broadly throughout the community. Within these communities, increased personal access is not displacing demand for public access.

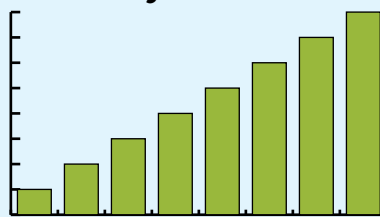
Libraries provide unique value as community tech hubs

Two major themes emerged when users were asked **why** they chose to access technology at the library despite having personal devices. First, users cite **cost** as one driving factor. While they have access to a personal device, they usually can't afford the amount of mobile data they'd prefer to use. Second, users referenced the value of using technology in a **safe environment** that is focused on learning.

“ Mobile data is expensive, so when I have the chance to use the Internet for free, I usually use it for learning things. ”
– Library user



86%
increase in
library visitation



“ The library is very close to us, so anytime we are free we can access it. ...We also feel safe here, the staff are very good and the people are friendly. ”
– Library user

What did we learn?



Public access matters because peer learning matters

Peer learning was central to building the capacity of librarians to manage tech hubs

This initiative asked librarians to embrace technological change and take on new ways of serving the needs of their communities. Peer learning was an essential component of ensuring that these changes were integrated and sustainable at the libraries. The program did this by incorporating quarterly peer learning meetings and fostering peer networks via Facebook and Viber. The librarians have used these networks to share and iterate on ideas, maximizing the impact of any training they receive. The net impact for librarians is seen in their improved digital skills and increased confidence in teaching digital skills to others.



“ Now, because of the tablets, we are showing, and that is very effective; it is something we have never done before. So I can also share my IT knowledge, which I’ve never done before. – Librarian ”

Peer learning and skills development are a part of the institutional DNA of libraries

In Myanmar, libraries are widely recognized as a community institution anchored in learning. So adding technology to that institution helps to create a natural link between technology and learning. Informally, libraries have provided **enabling environments** that foster both access and peer support for skills development. Over the life of the project, libraries have also taken on a greater role in providing **digital skills training**.

Over time, technology use patterns shifted from content consumption to creation

During the Phase 1 evaluation, users cited a wide range of technology uses including gaming, accessing news, and using social media and language learning apps. During the Phase 2 evaluation, users placed greater focus on using productivity and Microsoft Office apps. A combination of factors likely led to this shift, including times of limited internet access, the introduction of laptops and Microsoft tablets, and the growth of basic skills, confidence, and interest in using technology in new ways.



What did we learn?



Libraries provide open access but targeted interventions are needed to guarantee use by diverse populations

Libraries naturally reach those in the “aspiring class”

Initial results showed that generally the technology encouraged more frequent use but often by similar segments of the community that were already using the library. Many of the users surveyed were current or aspiring university students. They often owned a smartphone but couldn't necessarily afford mobile data on a consistent basis. The ability to access learning and information resources, alongside communication and social media tools, was a driving motivation for their internet use.



Targeted interventions diversify library and technology use

The introduction of the Tech Age Girls (TAG) program at 20 libraries shifted the demographics of technology use. TAG is a year-long program that equipped 100 young women aged 16-20 to use technology as a tool for leadership and community development. The findings before TAG began showed that boys and men were the primary technology users at libraries. The findings after the start of TAG show an increased rate of technology and library use by girls. Girls have also noted increased technology skills and confidence with technology.



“The reason I arrived here at the library was TAG. Because of TAG, I enhanced a lot. Because of the program, I got connected to the library and then I had the opportunity to attend the other trainings happening at this library. – TAG participant”

Gender breakdown of study interviews

Phase 1



24



43

Phase 2



34



15

What's next?



Recommendations

Provide consistent internet access through public-private partnership

While IREX and MBAPF were able to successfully secure a private partnership with Ooredoo to supply mobile internet access for the libraries, there were still challenges in providing consistent coverage through the life of the project. Government and development actors need to play a larger role alongside private partners to ensure that communities have ongoing and consistent public access to the internet through libraries.

Expand services to reach more marginalized groups through libraries

The success of Tech Age Girls shows the power of targeted interventions to shift the demographics of library use. These types of interventions are successful because they pair internet access with the opportunity to develop skills tailored to the specific needs of the target community or demographic. Libraries and development actors must continue to expand services targeted to the most marginalized groups.

Expand modernization to reach all of Myanmar's 5,000 libraries

The 90 project libraries have proven their potential to connect communities to new skills and opportunities to make the most of the new technology and internet made accessible to them. The Ministry of Information has begun work on a library modernization plan, and this work must continue to ensure that all 5,000 libraries in Myanmar are capable of supporting digital skills development in their communities.



About IREX

IREX is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to building a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world by empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information. Since 2013, IREX has promoted equitable access to quality information and technology through 90 public libraries in partnership with the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF).

