



knowledge without boundaries

EIFL-PLIP

Improving lives and livelihoods through innovative public library services

IMPACT CASE STUDY

Library service shows farmers the value of ICT Public Library Laboratorio del Espiritu, Colombia

The library uses information and communication technology (ICT) to improve the lives of fruit, vegetable and livestock farmers living in six villages around El Retiro in Colombia's Antioquia district.

The ICT for Rural Development service –

- Increased numbers of people from farming communities using ICT at the library, from 20 in 2011 to 150 in 2012.
- Sparked interest in new income-generating activities – through the internet, women farmers learnt how to make handbags from recycled cloth. A group now meets every week to make bags and to research marketing opportunities online.
- Raised visibility of the library with local farmers' associations, for example, the Association of Avocado Producers of El Retiro, whose members are now sharing knowledge via email, blogs and You Tube.
- Won an award for outstanding contribution to rural development.
- Led to formation of a group of five institutions, including public libraries and other information service providers, to work together to develop impact research methodology to assess the contribution of public libraries to community development.



"We always had to ask someone to do a favour – to send an email or to look for information. Now we can do it on our own." – Luz Estela Villa Martínez, farmer.

"Our library supports women farmers by guiding them to use ICT to seek information that helps them reflect on their lives, and review their decisions and consider new ideas and dreams." – Orlanda Agudelo Mejia, trainer at Laboratorio del Espiritu.

Community need

ICT is rare in El Retiro and in the villages of Pantanillo, La Amapola, Pantalio, Tabacal, Los Medios and Nazareth. Laboratorio del Espiritu – the only library serving these villages – has 12 computers, but farmers do not come to the library regularly because they do not have digital skills or realize the potential of ICT to improve their livelihoods. They are therefore missing out on vital information, for example, about farming methods and market opportunities. Also, the terrain is rugged, public transport is poor and farming communities are isolated from each other and the outside world. The library saw the potential of ICT to increase access to information and improve community communications.





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With a grant of US\$15,000 from EIFL-PLIP to cover training costs, technical support, web design and transport for one year, the library initiated their programme for farmers. They began by launching an intensive marketing campaign, using mobile phone text messages, radio and TV, to encourage farmers to come to the library for free ICT training.

In less than a year, the library...

- Trained 130 people to use computers, to research the internet and use email and social networking tools.
- Built trainees' audiovisual skills – taking photographs and making videos.
- Created a [lively service blog](#) where farmers and their families now share experiences and upload photographs and videos.
- Trained 20 people to produce radio programming for a future community radio station.

The future

Farmers in other villages have requested ICT training, and the library will use part of their Civic Development Corporation/Medellin Rotary Club award to strengthen and expand the service. To take ICT to people in more remote villages, the library plans to introduce a mobile training service, working with the Metropolitan Network of Libraries. Further plans to improve community communication include establishing a community radio station, working with ASENRED (the Association of Radio Stations of Eastern Antioquia) and local schools.

The EIFL-PLIP grant was awarded in November 2011. A year later, the library assessed the impact of the service. Information presented here is based on the library's impact assessment. For further information contact Mr Fernando Hoyos – elmundodelcampoentic@gmail.com.

[EIFL](#) (Electronic Information for Libraries) is an international not-for-profit organization dedicated to enabling access to knowledge through libraries in more than 60 developing and transition countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. EIFL's Public Library Innovation Programme (EIFL-PLIP) supports libraries to implement community development projects. Learn more at www.eifl.net/plip. EIFL's Public Library Innovation Programme is supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Public libraries - partners in development

Laboratorio del Espiritu won the highly-prized Germán Saldarriaga Valley Award of US\$64,500 in recognition of its work with marginalized communities. The award is jointly presented by the Civic Development Corporation and the Rotary Club of Medellin, who especially praised the library's ICT for Rural Development project for 'advancing the creation of a new form of rural-cultural education in the country'.

There are over 1,600 public libraries in Colombia. Together they present a major opportunity to stimulate local development by providing access to life-changing information, and helping isolated communities connect to each other and the outside world.

"I had never touched a computer in my life, and I confess, I felt very nervous at first, but then I lost my fear. I even created my own address and was able to communicate and relate to other people, with the wonder of these devices!" – Blanca Villegas Olivia Franco, avocado farmer, after attending 18 computer classes.