

Public library's golden pathway to successful service: Understanding your community needs

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Abstract

Since its launch in 2009, the EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) Public Library Innovation Programme (EIFL-PLIP) has supported piloting of 49 new public library projects in 27 developing and transition economy countries, including 21 projects in eight countries in Africa. Starting out as one-year projects, the majority have become sustainable public library services. These services have improved the lives of thousands of people in the areas like education, health and economic wellbeing.

By working with libraries on practical projects and by conducting research, EIFL-PLIP has constructed 'a road map' for successful development of new services in libraries. The starting point of the road map is community needs assessment.

Through community needs assessment, public librarians gain understanding of real community challenges and needs, and can respond to these in project and service development. Community needs assessment also enables public libraries to generate information that will inform aspects of service design, for example, selecting appropriate technology and location of service delivery; building on community skills and avoiding service duplication in resource-poor environments. Community needs assessment also enables librarians to generate relevant indicators for monitoring progress and assessing the impact of services.

The majority of public libraries in developing and transition economy countries have limited resources and capacity. It is therefore essential that community needs assessment processes and methodologies are simple, practical and low cost.

This paper reflects on EIFL-PLIP's experience of working with public libraries to develop new, technology-based services in low resource environments, and includes useful tips and examples of conducting community needs assessment.

Introduction

Library literature shows quite significant efforts by practitioners and researchers to understand information needs of different library user groups, such as rural communities, schoolchildren, researchers and students, and other. Also, there is quite extensive research on library accessibility for persons with special needs.

However, the traditional approach of studying user needs for information is limited as Md. Shariful Islam and S.M. Zabed Ahmed (2012) note in their review of studies of information needs and information-seeking behavior of rural residents in developed and developing countries. Being able to predict what information people might need is important for collection

development decisions, but does not automatically lead to better library services in practice, in terms of improved access and usability. There are more aspects to be aware of in order to create beneficial services that will be well used in the community (Shariful and Zabed, 2012).

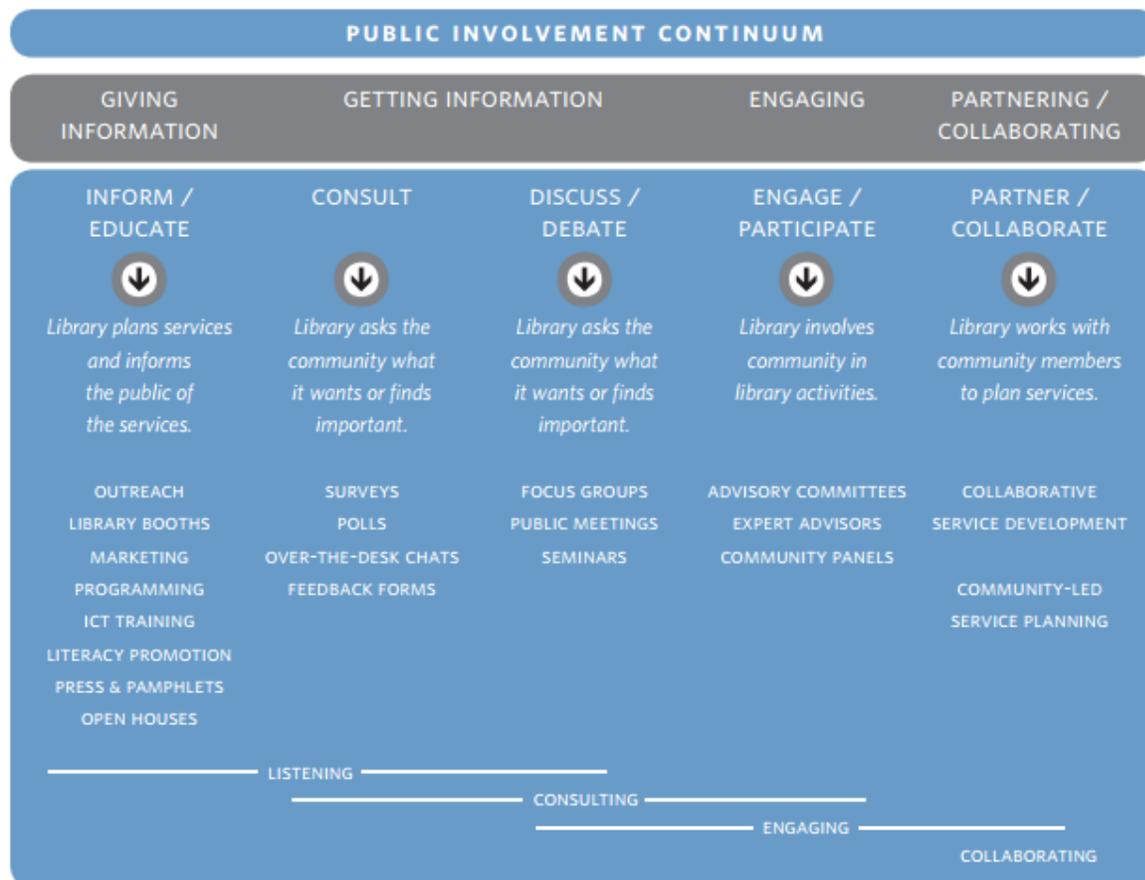
A study of information needs of nomadic students in Iran breaks away from the traditional research approach. In addition to studying reading interests of young people, researchers delved into preferred formats, locations and modes of information delivery and use. Based on the results they suggested re-modelling library services by building an unconventional partnership between academic and public libraries, post offices and tele-cottages to meet young people's demand for knowledge, skills, and for boosting their confidence to succeed in their lives (Dehpadekani and Pourhamidi, 2011).

Yet another practical approach comes from Canada, where the *Working Together Project* was initiated by Vancouver Public Library in 2004 to build vital links between library services and low and socially excluded communities. The report of this valuable four-year demonstration project was published in 2008. Outcomes include many valuable lessons, and a comprehensive ready-to-use *Community-Led Service Planning Toolkit based on the project's experience*. There are a few findings relevant to this paper, focused on necessity of community needs assessment in developing new services and further improving existing practices:

Firstly, a live interaction with poor, immigrant and socially excluded people from four communities across Canada led librarians to a shocking discovery, that the claim of public libraries being the most open and inclusive service is not true. It appeared that many people from the target group had negative experiences of using libraries, and perceive them as unwelcoming and discouraging places. So, the lesson #1 for us as library professionals is, without ongoing dialogue and commitment to listen there will always be gaps in our knowledge about community. Library perceptions by professionals, based on observation of frequent and confident library users, does not apply to the all community groups. Similarly, needs and basic skills levels defined by library professionals might not be correct. Also, specific social groups might prioritize and perceive or interpret community needs differently. It is also important to understand people's expectations of the library services, and actual or perceived barriers they face.

Secondly, there is a difference between outreach – the traditional library-driven approach to relating to communities – and community-led service development. In the latter case, the community is recognized as an equal partner in service prioritizing and planning, and the librarians have to learn how to share decisions regarding the library services and programmes. Though participatory approaches to developing community-based services are not new to public library professionals, the practice of talking and listening to the community members (including non-users and hard-to-reach social groups, like illiterates, immigrants, poor community members) is relatively rare. Generally, there is

the continuum of community engagement types and activities used by public library service development as showed in the picture 1 below¹.



This excellent overview of community involvement continuum sets the context for talking about innovative library services that make use of technology, and that the EIFL Public Library Innovation Programme (EIFL-PLIP) supports in developing and transition economy countries. Though all types of community engagement are useful and should be used by the libraries, our experience shows that more collaborative approaches should be taken for planning a new service for the first time in particular library, i.e. service innovation, rather than traditional outreach, which may be better for informing and educating the community about existing library services and programmes.

EIFL’s Public Library Innovation Programme

In 2009, with a grant from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the international not-for-profit organization EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) initiated a special programme – EIFL-PLIP – to advance community development through supporting projects to demonstrate service

¹ Reprinted with the permission by Vancouver Public Library from ‘Working Together Project. Community-Led Libraries Toolkit’. (2008). Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. Available online at: http://www.librariesincommunities.ca/resources/Community-Led_Libraries_Toolkit.pdf

innovation in public libraries. Since its launch in 2009, EIFL-PLIP has supported 49 pilot projects² in public libraries in developing and transition economy countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. These projects mostly became sustainable services that have improved the lives of thousands of people in the areas like education, health, agriculture and economic wellbeing.

EIFL-PLIP has supported, through grants and other support, introduction of 21 new services in eight African countries. These services address a variety of pressing community needs like illiteracy, poor health and hygiene, unproductive farming methods, plant and livestock health, low motivation of students and high failure rate in school exams; digital information and communications technology skills needs, etc. To receive support, the projects had to demonstrate that they were innovative according to EIFL-PLIP's definition, which was – the service was new to the library and the community; it integrated technology in or combinations of technology in creative ways, and included non-traditional partners. Here are some examples to show the wide range of different approaches taken by successful applicants:

- *In Zambia*, Lubuto Library in 2011 worked with international technology experts to introduce computer-based reading lessons that teach Zambia's children to read and write in mother-tongue³
- *In Ghana*, Volta regional library in 2013 teamed with ICT specialists to equip mobile van with solar panels and bring laptops to schools for kids to learn ICT's in practice and get better exams results⁴.
- *In Uganda*, Maendeleo foundation in 2013 installed wi-fi internet connections and 15 netbook computers in five rural libraries and worked with government farm support agencies, university and farmers groups to provide access to relevant information and skills to the remote farming communities⁵.
- *In Kenya*, Kibera Community Library in 2013 collaborated with technology entrepreneurs eLimu to bring tablet computers with games and educational content into the library and to help children improve their marks at school⁶.
- *In Burkina Faso*, Friends of African Village Libraries (FAVL) in 2014 introduced solar battery charged smart phones for the health related information research in four community libraries and partnered with local health workers to carry weekly health clubs for girls.⁷

² Read about all EIFL-PLIP grantees online at: <http://www.eifl.net/programme/public-library-innovation-programme/eifl-plip-grantees>

³ Read more about the service at: www.eifl.net/programme/public-library-innovation-programme/eifl-plip-grantees

⁴ Read more about the service at: <http://www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/hands-computer-classes-struggling-students>

⁵ Read more about the service at: www.eifl.net/resources/maendeleo-foundation-uganda-connecting-farmers-four-regions

⁶ Read more about the service at: www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/tablet-computers-improve-childrens-school-marks

⁷ Read more about the service at: www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/four-rural-libraries-create-mobile-health-clubs-teenage-girls

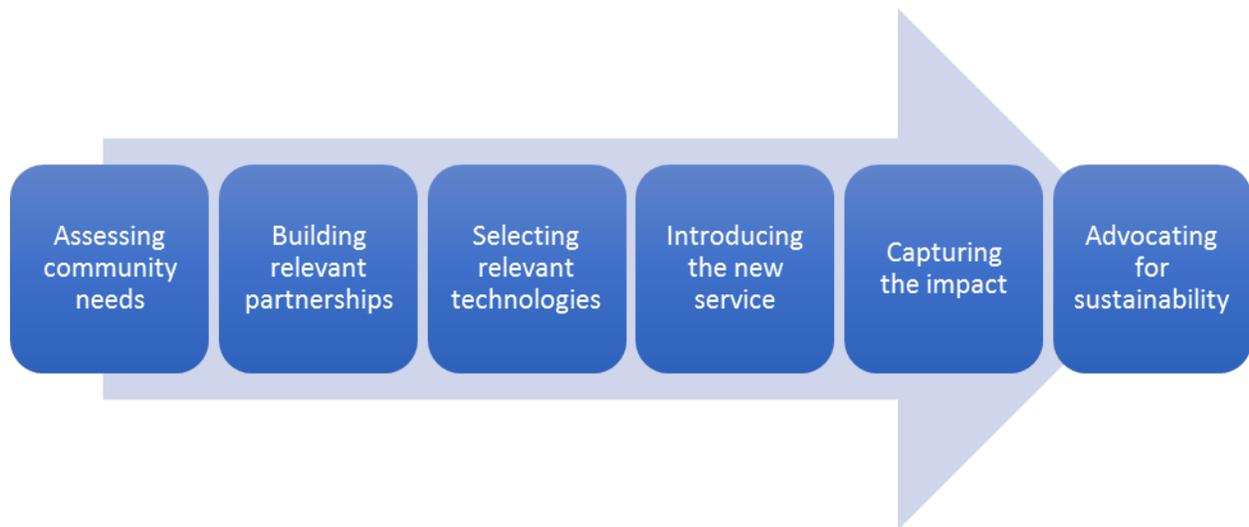
- *In Ethiopia*, CODE-Ethiopia in 2014 created opportunities for early literacy development for in four community libraries using computers, projector and books. Parents learn to help their children interact with books at the library’s family literacy sessions and continue practice at home⁸.

Why we have all these different approaches in relatively similar projects that introduce and test technology in public library services? Because all grantee libraries serve communities, which live in specific economic, cultural and political circumstances and face particular issues. Based on data and evidence from needs assessment, before applying to EIFL-PLIP for a grant each public library have chosen the community issue to address, approach, and the target group to reach by the new service.

New service development model

Projects, such as the ones initiated through EIFL-PLIP support, are commonly initiated by libraries to pilot a new service. Before turning the service into ordinary (cyclic) library operations and budgeting, library has to gain practical experience and knowledge in new area, to test new approaches, technologies and tools, to extend traditional partnerships and to assess impact.

The EIFL-PLIP new service development model, set out in Picture 1, below, shows, how the new service evolves within a fixed project lifecycle (timeline).



Picture 2. EIFL-PLIP model of development of innovative services in public libraries (Petuchovaite, Tamakloe, 2014).

The EIFL-PLIP model consist of six steps that are grouped into four common phases of project lifecycle:

⁸ Read more about the service at: www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/rural-libraries-improving-early-literacy-levels-pre-school-children

- **Planning**, that includes assessing community needs, developing the service concept building partnerships and selecting appropriate technologies, approach and resources, defining the desired results and impact areas, identifying sources of funding and other resources, and applying for them.
- **Implementing**, which includes all necessary tasks to turn the concept and plan into a real-life service, like building capacity of library staff and partners; procuring technology, tools and resources, acquiring and installing them; designing training and awareness-raising programmes for users and delivering them. This is important phase for the library to gather experience and all possible knowledge about the service operation, find and test solutions to unexpected issues, get an understanding about recurring costs that will allow turn the pilot into continuous service and share experience with the others.
- **Assessing results** and the impact of the new service on users, which includes building or adapting assessment tools to capture results and impact, defined during planning phase; collecting the data and qualitative information, and analyzing it. Although an impact assessment phase is shown at the end of the project lifetime, preparations for measuring results and assessing changes in community brought by the library should start in planning phase. Assessment can also lead to service improvement by using the results to make any necessary changes.
- **Advocating for continuous services.** Experience gained during the implementation phase and information produced by impact assessment are key for advocacy efforts, targeting government, for future funding and support for sustainability of technology-based services. Although, advocacy tends to take place at the end of the project cycle, preparations for advocacy activities could start earlier, for example, early in the project librarians will need to identify key target groups or individual decision makers to be informed, persuaded to change opinion or take supportive action. In addition, community engagement in the planning phase of the service allows building relationships with potential service users, raising their interest and awareness about the library, and winning support for the service in the community.

All EIFL-PLIP projects provide evidence that, if public libraries seek to enter into community development with innovative projects and services, they will face the challenges of change and the uncertainties change brings. As technology-based services require fairly high initial investment, government or development funders may not be prepared to take risks without assurance that their investment will lead to positive results. At the beginning of the service innovation, librarians may have some understanding and ideas about what could work, based on other knowledge of what other libraries have achieved. However, they risk failure, especially if use of the services requires additional skills and effort on the part of users. Engaging with the community, and learning about their needs and their ideas about how best to realize their needs, is more likely to result in success. Libraries that can demonstrate they know and understand community needs and they have a support of community and partners are also more likely to be able to convince government and other donors to fund their services.

New service always puts a library in a start position

EIFL-PLIP programme also seeks promote replicability of piloted innovative services in different environment, especially in low-resourced libraries, through wide sharing of case studies, based on grantee library projects' assessment results.

Projects implemented as a result of an EIFL-PLIP call for replication⁹ in 2011 provide evidence that the ideas of technology use for addressing community needs can travel and be successfully implemented by public libraries in other countries and regions. For example, in 2010, with EIFL-PLIP grant Kenya National Library Service set up e-health corners in two branch public libraries in the towns of Kisumu and Eldoret. In the replication call for projects, the idea of public libraries providing access to electronic health resources and connecting with health professionals was taken, developed further and adapted by three public libraries from Asia and Eastern Europe. In 2010, also, Public Library 'Radislav Nikčević', Serbia re-designed four village libraries that combined free computer and internet access and skills training, a web portal and online market, books and articles about agriculture and lectures to support farmers. Later this very successful and award winning service piloted in Serbia inspired services to farmers in other public libraries from Africa, Latin America and Europe.

In 2014, EIFL conducted a study into how and why public libraries innovate. Findings suggested that a key motivating factor is librarians' wish to make the library more relevant to the community. Public librarians are inspired to innovate by success stories of relevant, adaptable innovative services offered by the other libraries from the same country or region, and beyond. (Femenía, Sadunisvili, Lipeikaite, 2015). This means that an active professional community through networking and knowledge sharing activities, such as conferences, workshops, discussions and library visits – plays an important role in adoption of innovations in broader library community.

Though the motivation to innovate and ideas may be sparked by the example of others, and often speeded by external funding opportunities, but EIFL-PLIP experience shows, it is absolutely essential that each local library takes local factors and conditions into account when planning to replicate any new service idea. Though there might be similarities in the development issues faced by communities in different countries and regions, it is a mistake to assume that, if the project or new service idea worked in one library well, it will be successful and demanded by their community.

Regardless of how well the service worked in other places and how widespread it is within library community, the library intending to take the service on board stands at the start position of the new service development model (See picture 2). The success of the project, impact and value of the service will always depend on from whose point of view the library defined the

⁹ In 2011 EIFL-PLIP issued a special grant call inviting public libraries to replicate successful services that had been initiated with EIFL-PLIP support the previous year, in the areas of health, agriculture, improving economic wellbeing and serving the needs of children and youth at risk. The replication grant invitation was accompanied by detailed case studies of successful services in these areas. Applicants were invited to assess the ideas and approaches described in the case studies, to adapt them to their local contexts and to submit proposals for support for services replicating them. EIFL-PLIP awarded grants to 14 successful applicants for these replication grants.

problem and how well librarians understands the needs, preferences, expectations and studied behavior of the target group.

A success story of Masiphumelele Community Library, South Africa – EIFL-PLIP replication call grantee – illustrates the value of the library’s efforts to understand community needs.

Replication case: Masiphumelele Community Library in South Africa replicated aspects of Ghana Library Authority / Northern Regional Library’s Internet Access and Training Programme (IATP), that combined ICT and leadership training for vulnerable, unemployed youth living in the town of Tamale in northern Ghana and surrounding villages.¹⁰ In their grant application, Masiphumelele Community Library identified which aspects of the Ghana project they planned to replicate:

- “training of young people in ICT;
- building on partnerships, specifically with the City of Cape Town and local NGO’s working with youth;
- drawing young people into the library and promoting it within the community;
- positive impact on young peoples computer confidence; social interaction; time management; and information access skills.
- increasing individuals’ employable skills base”.¹¹

Need: Masiphumelele Community Library’s ICT training and employment information programme focused on the needs of youth in an impoverished peri-urban community near Cape Town, where unemployment is extremely high, especially among youth. The library drew on national statistics about internet access in South Africa (in 2008, just under 11% of people were accessing the internet), and their own knowledge and observations of ICT resources in the community, reporting that there was no other public free or paid computer access in the settlement, and that the library’s computer laboratory and classes were insufficient to meet needs of high numbers of youth coming to the library (learners were sitting three-deep to computers).

Target group: The library’s ICT training, careers counselling and job-readiness programme targeted unemployed and vulnerable young people in Masiphumelele.

Impact: In just one year (2011-2012), Masiphumelele Community Library helped 20 vulnerable young people find jobs and encouraged another 31 to enter further education. The library trained 1,540 beginners and 48 intermediate ICT students. At the end of training, trainees receive a certificate stating their level of computer skills (basic, intermediate, advanced) which they attach to their CVs. Library users interviewed as part of the project’s impact assessment research were extremely positive about the service:

“This library has changed my life because I am learning and I will get a certificate instead of just sitting home doing nothing,” Sikhumbuzo Tsobo told the library.

“Now I have my own email address, I surf for jobs and careers for myself and friends. The computer classes are the best - I’ve gained a lot,” said Noxolo Memke (Fairbairn and Lipeikaite, 2014).

¹⁰ Read more about the service: <http://www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/libraris-training-builds-young-leaders>

¹¹ Extract from Masiphumelele Community Library’s grant application to EIFL in 2011.

Sustainability: In 2016 – four years after the end of the project – the library was continuing to build young people’s skills, confidence and employability. By focusing on pressing community needs and demonstrating the positive impact on lives of local youth, the library boosted its reputation in the community as an effective and successful local organization. As a result, more volunteers expressed willingness to run ICT training programmes for community members, enabling the library to extend training to younger children and run short hands-on ICT workshops to local micro businesses, i.e. hairdressers, shopkeepers and others. With the donated second-hand computers by community members, the library expanded computer room from 14 to 20 computers. Subsequently, the local government took a decision to provide ongoing support for internet and the other basic costs of the library¹².

Conclusions and recommendations

Understanding community needs is paramount to building and sustaining public library for the community. However, each library needs to be practical and decide on complexity of the effort of community involvement, depending on the purpose, previous experience and knowledge, as well as available resources. With an existing library, it is not necessary to spend years building an exhaustive and data rich community profile for each service innovation. The library needs to plug into existing knowledge and relationships and share authority and responsibility with the community members for building the local library with a unique offer that is on demand by its community.

Some public libraries, especially small and low-resourced ones, may be discouraged from engaging in more interactive types of community needs assessment, because

- Needs assessment is believed to require library staff to have special research and facilitation skills and experience;
- Librarians fear that data collection will turn into a huge time and resource consuming task, not feasible in public libraries with tiny staffs (sometimes as few as one or two people);
- Lack of community engagement skills communities do not always find it easy to express their needs, and librarians need skills to elicit these);
- Difficulties in persuading people to take part in discussion on library matters;.
- Librarians and library managers sometimes see community needs assessment as a formality, needed only for filling a proposal template or planning document.

Certainly, community engagement will require some practical research, facilitation and other skills, and data collection, but it is important to bear in mind that libraries are about people, not books or technology. Therefore a focus on people, and efforts to deepen understanding of the community and the local context, leading to improved decisions about content, design and delivery of service, is worth the trouble. In addition to improving project design, community needs assessment processes helps build relationships and trust, and raises librarians’ awareness

¹² Read more about the service: <http://www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/setting-young-people-secure-career-paths>

about existing community assets, potential partners and may open the doors to new opportunities.

EIFL-PLIP has developed a tip sheet for community needs assessment that offers a simple, practical and low-cost methodology that will enable libraries to obtain information for making decisions about the shape of new services. The methodology combines listening, consulting and engaging, and - although it was created specifically for public libraries designing services for children and youth, it can be modified for learning about the needs of other target groups.

EIFL-PLIP TIP SHEET: Needs assessment for innovative library services preparing children and youth for the future
1. Why is it important to conduct a user needs assessment?
The aim of the needs assessment is to ensure that the service under development is really needed by the target group. The user needs assessment provides evidence to support your service (project) objectives.
2. What kinds of evidence can demonstrate “the need”?
Evidence of "user needs" can be pre-existing or it can be gathered especially for the specific project. Acceptable evidence can be provided in various ways including, the following: – Finding and interpreting statistical evidence. – Interviews with users, non-users or stakeholders [e.g. youth, community leaders] – Focus groups with users, non-users or stakeholders [including relevant community organizations] – Surveys of users, non-users or stakeholders – Anecdotal evidence/ hearsay/impressions – Evidence of limitations on existing services [e.g. poor opening hours if the project will extend opening hours; reaching the community if the new project will be mobile]. – Pointing to success of similar services elsewhere ["benchmarking"]. – Web statistics [if an existing web service is to be improved] – Observation of users' behaviour.
3. What about quality of evidence?
Please provide the best quality of evidence you can with the time and resources available to you. For example, if you decide to do a survey, think carefully about the questions, and be sure they are relevant. But we do not expect you to do a very large survey for this application.
4. Whose need should be demonstrated?

Evidence of user needs should be about the target group[s] that the project aims to reach and serve. This grant invitation is for innovative library projects that serve needs of children and youth –

- By children and youth, we mean all people aged under 24.
- By children, we mean people aged up to 14.
- By youth, we mean people aged from 15 to 24.

Your project may target children, or youth, or both children and youth.
 Your project may aim to serve all children and / or youth in the community, or a sub-set (particular group) of children and / or youth, for example defined by -

- Gender, or
- Family income level, or
- Ethnicity, or
- Language, or
- Employed/unemployed, or
- Skills and knowledge [e.g. literacy/numeracy or computer literacy], or
- Physically disability, or
- Objective-orientation – for example, girls who need encouragement to stay in school; youth who want to pursue careers in digital technology.

The users your project aims to help could be defined by multiple characteristics, for example:

- Girls from an ethnic minority community who want to participate in local community decision-making processes.

5. Where can the evidence come from?

Evidence of "need" could come directly from the target group to be served or it could be more indirect or circumstantial. Possible sources of evidence include one or more of the following:

- Users of a related service [e.g. existing library users]
- Non-users of libraries
- Members of the specifically targeted group/s
- Stakeholders related to the targeted groups, who can speak on their behalf [e.g. teachers, parents, social workers, relevant organizations]
- Political or financial stakeholders/ funders
- Other librarians who have implemented similar projects
- Authoritative statements about policy priorities of local, regional or national government [e.g. the regional chairman says “Our top priority this year is to ensure that all young school leavers can use the internet for research and communication.”]
- Known facts or statistics such as those found in a community profile [e.g. many schoolchildren and little provision for them after school].

There are a number of open access library resources that provide practical examples and case studies of involving community and creating extraordinary new services. For example,

- The *Community-led Libraries Toolkit* - mentioned earlier in this paper, resulting from the Working Together Project implemented by Vancouver Public Library in collaboration with Regina Public Library, Halifax Public Libraries, Toronto Public Library (Canada).
- The *Design Thinking Toolkit for Libraries*, created by international design company IDEO in collaboration of Aarhus Public Libraries (Denmark) and Chicago Public Libraries (U.S.) with the support by Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. Librarians from 10 countries, including developing and transition economy countries, contributed to development and adaptation of the human-centered design methodology for libraries. The toolkit includes practical examples, case studies and useful exercises that guide library

staff in creative processes of developing new services or adapting library's spaces to community needs (Design thinking for libraries, 2015).

These and other tested resources are useful for learning new methods and looking at the library from the users' point of view, for identifying gaps in librarians' knowledge, and helping librarians to overcome challenges on the journey to creating a better library for the community.

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