

Interim report on the grant

“Creation of rural community centers in the Lori Region of Armenia, based on digitized rural libraries with broadband Internet, WiFi access points, videoconferencing capabilities, and training community in digital skills”

1. PROJECT NOTE

Name of the NGO carrying the project: ISOC Armenia Chapter

Expected length of the program: 12 months

Name of the project: Creation of rural community centers in the Lori Region of Armenia, based on digitized rural libraries with broadband Internet, WiFi access points, videoconferencing capabilities and, training community in digital skills.

The project will include 14 rural libraries at the Lori region of Armenia.

Thematic: Community Development

Main partners: ISOC AM NGO (Armenia Internet Registry), “Team” (local Internet operator)

Project summary

For several years ISOC Armenia Chapter has been working with rural libraries, providing them computers, digitizing libraries with the Chapter developed software and training people in rural areas in computer and Internet literacy, social networks, and security.

During the Chapterthon 2021 we tested the idea of turning rural libraries into community Internet centers by providing them with broadband Internet, Internet terminals, and WiFi access points. The model that has been developed is to be implemented in the Lori region of Armenia. Armenia has 11 regions, and we are planning to provide broadband Internet access to rural libraries in all of them. Lori region is the first one in the row.

The goal of the project

4 objectives have been set to implement the project:

1. Provide broadband Internet access to rural libraries.
2. Turn rural libraries into community Internet centers by providing them with Internet terminals, WiFi access points, and videoconferencing devices.
3. Digitize rural libraries by providing them with computers with preinstalled digitized library software.
4. Train the community in digital skills.

Context and issue

Rural libraries are the best places for setting a community Internet access centers as they already work as community cultural centers, have necessary infrastructure, knowledgeable staff, and willingness to serve the community. Providing libraries with broadband Internet, WiFi access points, and videoconferencing equipment will turn them into community centers.

The program has 2 technical partners for this program.

Technical partners	Status	Role	Added value
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ISOC AM NGO	Armenia Internet Registry	Ensure the implementation of the program, facilitates institutional relationships, takes care of the overall coherence of the program, participates in the implementation of the program, and provide technical expertise (workshop and training related to Internet literacy).	Technical expertise and strategic development study. Training of stakeholders to the difference aspects of Internet community center management.
Team	Local Internet operator	Ensures the implementation of the program, facilitates institutional relationships, takes care of the overall coherence of the program, participates in the implementation of the program, and provide technical expertise (communication).	Provide broadband Internet to rural libraries. Training of stakeholders to the broadband communication channel management.

Beneficiaries:

- Library visitors
- Local community
- Rural population

Target group:

- Library visitors
- Local community
- Rural population

1. CONTENT OF THE PROJECT

Objective 1:

Provide broadband Internet access to rural libraries of Lori region of Armenia.

The proposed project is in line with the Internet Society goals “Internet is for everyone” and “Connect the Unconnected” and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), established by the United Nations, which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

ISOC Armenia Chapter is doing a lot to help rural population by tending their needs, supplying equipment, and providing various support services. One of our continuous programs is helping rural libraries with digitization, Internet connection and provision of WiFi access to Internet for library visitors and training them in digital skills.

To help in achieving the goal of universal access to broadband connectivity we negotiated with one of the leading Armenian Internet providers with a proposal to provide broadband Internet connection and discounted prices of broadband Internet connection for rural libraries. Modern libraries should necessarily have the Internet access to the world knowledge base and other educational resources. The broadband Internet connection will serve the purpose. Broadband Internet connection will also help young people in rural areas to learn English language, and IT profession to earn some money as freelancers. Recent research revealed that there is a need of tens of thousands IT professions in Armenia. They all can be filled by young people who can get profession having broadband Internet connection.

Achieved results: Five libraries already have broadband Internet connection. The rest 9 will have broadband during the next 3 months.

Objective 2:

Turn rural libraries into community Internet Centers.

To do that there was a need to set Internet terminals and WiFi access points. Libraries with WiFi Internet access experience a big increase in the number of visitors. It is because Internet-hungry young people are always looking for a place where they can connect to the Internet with their tablets and mobiles.

Elder people are also having a demand for good Internet to communicate with their relatives working abroad.

There are digital inequalities between rural and urban areas because of income inequalities. Today, about half of the global population remains offline. Most of those offline are from low-income families. Families in rural areas of Armenia can't afford to have broadband Internet at home. One of our goals is to bring affordable broadband connectivity to rural populations.

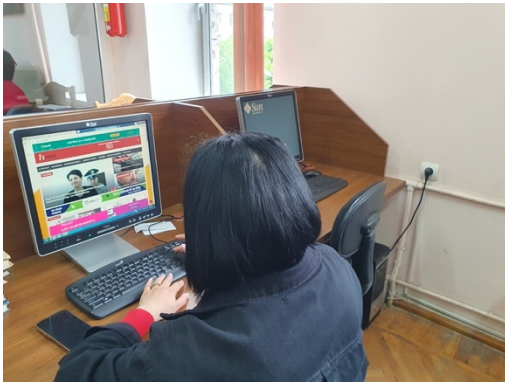
Rural libraries provided with broadband Internet, WiFi access, and Internet connection terminals are becoming community network nodes and facilitate the problem of Internet access in rural regions. During a Chapterthon 2021 project we tested the main goal of our further actions, i.e., setup broadband Internet and digitized Internet-connected rural libraries with WiFi access points for library visitors and use them as community network nodes. Our Chapterthon 2021 project was considered the best one among Internet Society European Chapters.

(<https://www.chronicle.isocchapter.am/publ/DIY%20Chapterthon%202021.pdf>)

In villages where people can't have Internet at homes this possibility is extremely valuable and will help people to have Internet access.

In general, COVID-19 highlighted the inequalities within countries, and the urgency of achieving the goal of universal access to broadband connectivity. Besides that, community centers can be used for healthcare, emergency consultations with medical offices, consulting rural nurses, e-banking, payments for services, filling online document for state offices.

Achieved results: 14 Libraries became community Internet centers. We completed all 14 libraries with the projected equipment ahead of schedule.



Lori regional library



Spitak town library



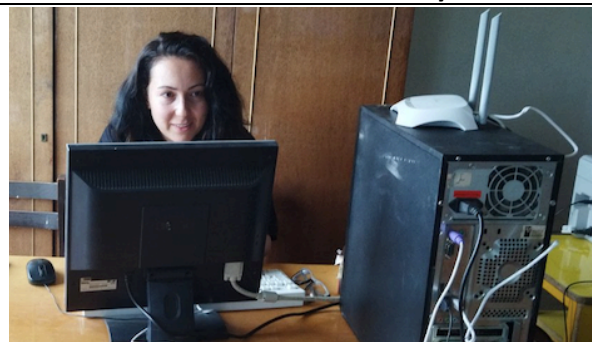
Tashir Library



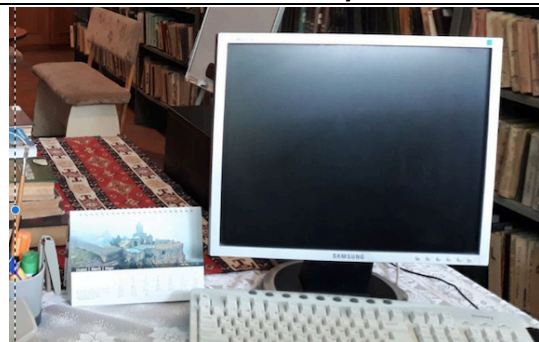
Vanadzor central library



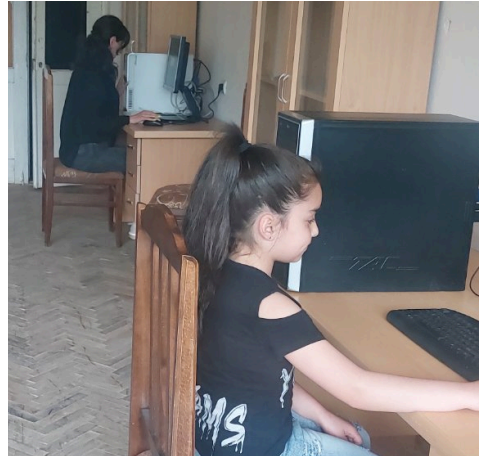
Vanadzor library N2



Jiliza library



Shahumyan community library



Gugark library



Vanadzor centralized library



Lori regional library



Jiliza library 2



Gugark library 2



Tashir Library 2



Vanadzor mass library N4



Akori library

Objective 3:

Digitize rural libraries by providing them with preinstalled digitized library software.

One of our continuous programs is helping rural libraries with digitization. During last several years we were equipping libraries with computers, library management software and training librarians. Presently we digitized a lot of rural libraries (www.rural-libraries.am). For that purpose, we developed a free superlight library management software.

Digitized libraries provide cataloging books, arrangement of books on shelves, registration of the issuance of books to readers and their return. Right now, digitized libraries software is working in ASCII coding. Within this project digitized libraries software will be upgraded to the UNICODE version. All messages of the software will be kept in a single file so that the localization of the software will require only the translation of messages into any other language. Besides that, a standard library book collection database will be developed, so that any new library setup will be much easier.



Vahan Misakyan reported on the UNICODE version of the library management program.

Achieved results: Digitized library software was upgraded to the UNICODE version. During the next 6 months we'll digitize all libraries by installing library servers with UNICODE based library management software. There is some delay in our plans because we were concentrated on turning libraries into community Internet centers.

Objective 4:

Train community in digital skills.

It is important not only create reliable communication links for rural people but also provide them digital skills.

There is a strong need in rural communities for computer and Internet literacy, social media, secure browsing, and e-mail usage courses. Training courses are needed both for young as well as for elder people. ISOC Armenia Chapter is planning to organize them both off-line and online. This kind of knowledge is necessary for finding job and further study on Internet courses in such famous e-learning centers are Coursera, Udemy, ISOC, and ICANN e-learning sites.

Expected result: Up to hundred representatives of rural population will be trained in digital skills.

Objectives 3 and 4 will be reached in quarters 3 and 4.

What is done:

Quarter 1
Provided broadband Internet to libraries 1-5

Installed Internet terminals, WiFi routers, and videoconferencing devices on sites 1-7, turning them into community centers
Quarter 2
Installed Internet terminals, WiFi routers, and videoconferencing devices on sites 8-14, turning them into community centers
Developed of the Unicode version of library management software

What is to be done in Quarters 3-4

Quarter 3
Provide broadband Internet to libraries 6-14
Install digitized libraries on sites 1-7
Development of a standard library catalogue
Training community in digital skills
Quarter 4
Training community in digital skills
Install digitized libraries on sites 8-14
Development of a standard library catalogue
Monitoring the activity of community centers and make necessary adjustments
Evaluating the project for replicating it in other regions of Armenia
Evaluating delivered courses and make corrections in the thematic

2. MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCEDURE

The activity of the community centers will be monitored, and necessary adjustments will be made. The project will be evaluated for replicating it in other regions of Armenia. Delivered courses will be evaluated and corrections in the thematic will be made.

3. PROGRAM'S IMPACTS

3.1. Social and economic impacts on beneficiaries

Rural population in the areas where community centers will be established will get broadband Internet access and will be trained in computer and Internet literacy, social media, and access to the world knowledge base.

The project goals and implementation were reported on the international conference "Connecting the Unconnected: Europe & Beyond", hold in Yerevan on June 6-7, 2023.

It was discussed during:

Panel Discussion 1: Enabling Policy Environments to Foster Connectivity and

Round Table: How to Empower the Rural Areas Communities.