

CASE STUDY

Hand in Hand: Enhancing E-inclusion of Farmers at Rural Public Libraries

Klaintaine Public Library, Plavinas Municipality, Latvia

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Hand in Hand means collaboration

In the case of Klaintaine Public Library it was collaboration of the library and local farmers owning small to medium size farms. Using the newest technologies the library connected farmers with new knowledge on better farming and opened their opportunities to access information and a range of e-government services via Internet at the library.

The project also included collaboration of the library and the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre, the project's partner. Through eight thematic online seminars the project brought together expertise of farming professionals and the library patrons seeking information on the latest legislative changes, accounting issues, EU support programs, e-services, farming matters and other issues.

Without collaboration it would not be possible as opportunities of a librarian at a single-person library in remote rural areas are often limited but the demand of patrons range from a single ICT consultancy to project proposal writing.

Introduction

In Latvia, during the last 5 years rural public libraries have become important community centers providing access to information, education, and culture and helping people to socialize. Libraries are especially important in rural areas where in many cases other institutions like culture centers, post offices, schools and bank affiliates have been closed. Even more, after the administrative reform many of the government services are available to rural citizens only in distant locations. Libraries have survived during the period of economic slowdown and now, having the ICT infrastructure, serve as a contact points where people come to look for solutions. People in rural areas have limited opportunities to find a job. For many of them farming has become the only way to survive.

Klaintaine Public Library like many other rural libraries in Latvia faces demand of small and medium farmers seeking assistance concerning access to general and agriculture specific information, including legislation, regulations, use of government e-services, interaction with authorities, etc.

Klaintaine Public Library serves 309 users. 62 of them (or 20%) come from farms in the neighboring area. Some of them visit the local library for only one reason – to search for information and skills crucial for managing their farms. In this situation library is forced to

take over duties provided by rural farming consultants. As these people are far away, local farmers turn to librarian.

How library can solve the situation and provide assistance to farmers? Shall librarian become farming consultant? As this idea doesn't sound realistic, solution in Klintaine case was found in creating a new library service for farmers.

The project Hand in Hand is based on a new approach to satisfy the farmers' needs for information, knowledge and specific ICT skills and increase their ability to survive in the challenging, fast changing social and economic environment. The project incorporates providing support for farming to farmers in the format of web based online trainings and seminars – webinars, as well as creating video records of the webinars available to the beneficiaries on the Internet after the project is completed.

Project Description

Based on the impact data collected by the 3rd project (Global Libraries program in Latvia) in 2011 and librarian questionnaire, as well as Klintaine library experience, the project's goal was to create a service and resources to support librarians in serving small and medium farmers searching assistance to their needs.

Goals of the project were:

- Create a new innovative service for public libraries – online seminars providing interaction between the presenters and participants when the resource is used online, as well as electronic resources available to the farmers at any time on the Internet.
- Create a resource based on a content that is from one side tailored to satisfy the demand of farmers, on the other side based on professional knowledge and expertise.
- Build a strong potential for enhancing e-inclusion of farmers at rural public libraries and improve social and economic development of the communities in rural areas and thus generate arguments for library advocacy.

The main group beneficiaries of the project were farmers running small or medium size farms in the area of Klintaine library, as well as users of other rural and small towns' public libraries all around the country.

The service was necessary for the small and medium farmers as they have limited financial opportunities to attend regional seminars basically organized by state organizations mainly in the central locations of 5 national regions of Latvia. The farmers are influenced by the legislative and other changes initiated by the government, the Ministry of Agriculture and other state institutions; they have limited access to the information on the EU programs for farming.

In order to make access to information and skills available to farmers in rural areas the Hand in Hand project offered them an opportunity to participate in the web based seminars, including interaction with presenters.

The project provided 8 online seminars covering agriculture and farming related information, knowledge and skills.

Implementation

Implementation of the Hand in Hand project incorporated a number of certain phases.

At first, a team of contributors was set. The team included Klintaine library as the project owner who coordinated all project components. Using the Skype several brainstorming sessions took place to make every contributor to understand the project idea and its goals, to identify tasks and responsibilities. Even if the project team was very small all necessary expertise areas were represented.

In the project planning phase attention was paid to two main project areas: contents of the seminars and the technology used to deliver the seminars. Due to the project partner's expertise and the library's good contact with local farmers, basic list of themes for seminars was set up. However, during the implementation and working with the invited experts, some of the topics were adjusted or changed. Moreover, by time farmers became the best advisers suggesting amendments to the primary planned list of themes. Working together we made the most suitable content for the seminars.

The Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre as the main project's partner assured both the experts who conducted the online seminars and solved all issues related to the technology and technical implementation of webinars. Their input was critical from the first to the last webinar and highly influenced the quality of the service.

The new service was marketed mainly by two communication channels. At first, it was Klintaine library profile on the national library portal biblioteka.lv, including the portal's main page. It was also marketed by the libraries in different regions of the country. Some of the regional newspapers and municipal portals responded to our call for their support. Some libraries were active in social media. Unfortunately, the social media are not yet the best communication tool if you need to reach farmers. Our experience shows that face-to-face communication and direct messaging works best for local farmers. Even simple notification on the board at the library or in the local shop works better.

We are really proud that the effort of Klintaine Public Library was very well esteemed by the Plavinas Municipality and that the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre subordinated to the Latvian Ministry of Agriculture has figured out the added value they can acquire when working with public libraries as an information and education point for reaching Latvian farmers.

Strategies, Tactics, and Tools

Two main elements of the Hand in Hand project were content and technology.

As the project idea derived from desire to support rural libraries in providing farmers with specific information and skills related to agriculture and farming it was obvious to involve agriculture experts and professionals in delivering the content of the seminars. For this reason the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre was invited to participate in the project.

In the Hand and Hand project we introduced online seminars using webinar technology as an innovative way to deliver information and skills to the library patrons. The project partner took the responsibility to find out the best ICT solution and performed the technical implementation, including technical assistance to individual libraries and users in case of necessity. The partner also took care about video recording and made the records of the webinars available on the YouTube for further use by individual users. See the link: [LLKC Tiessaistes seminari](#).

Klaintaine Public Library as the project owner obtained equipment needed to organize group participation in the webinars. Not all rural libraries are equipped with multimedia projector, screen and sound devices. However, these appliances are one of the success factors when organizing group events for library patrons.

Key Benefits

In the Hand in Hand project there were three main stakeholders: rural public libraries and Klaintaine library in particular, library patrons – farmers, and the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre, project's main partner. Everyone has obtained new experience, knowledge and skills. The libraries have become stronger in looking for new solutions how to satisfy their patrons, the Centre has obtained a new communication channel to address small and medium farmers around the country. In addition, the local government has benefited from the project. Plavinas Municipality has learned that the small public libraries shall be valued as an important partner of local governments as they can easier reach the community members and provide services essential for development of local societies.

Best of all the benefits of local farmers are described by themselves. The range of the benefits gained from the Hand in Hand project varies from very practical skills to a new level of meeting and learning together. See some quotes from the questionnaires and focus group discussion:

- ✓ I created closer partnership with other farmers in the area.
- ✓ I am proud how our librarian finds solutions to our information needs.
- ✓ The webinars helped not only to learn useful information. It was also an opportunity to discuss the issues together and learn together with my local partners.

- ✓ Practical knowledge on using electronic systems helps now a lot.
- ✓ Using the new knowledge I have implemented a new project at my farm.
- ✓ I learned not only the themes provided at webinars. I started to practice internet banking and use copying machine, and scanner. And I use librarian's guidance a lot.
- ✓ Accounting and legal information and usage of the electronic declaration system was the most valuable knowledge for me.

- ✓ Due to this project we learned a lot of useful information and skills, as the seminars were focused on practical issues and there was an opportunity to get immediate answers to the questions.

- ✓ The webinars helped us to save some money and time as it is much better to come to the local library instead of going to a seminar to some distant location.

- ✓ Now I have learned how to solve issues via Internet. In future I will not need to go to several centers to get or submit a single document. In our region different government institutions are located in different centers. Instead of wasting time on the way I now have knowledge to manage things electronically. I will not depend on working hours of the institutions in future.

- ✓ It is very important that the library webinars brought us [farmers from Klintaine area] together. Normally we do not meet. But communication is very important, especially in rural areas where we are so little left.

- ✓ Gathering at the library webinars have made our farmers community much closer. I even think that probably we will need to establish a cooperative some day in future. The library seminars for farmers have showed that it could be impossible as now we know each other better and we communicate more often.

- ✓ ICT skills are very important as they shape our capacity to use the e-services and access to the information.

- ✓ It is our benefit that librarian can teach us and help us to use technologies.

- ✓ The modern technologies are very helpful. They brought us [local farmers] together and connected with experts in a different side of the country.

Alita Klusa, manager of Klintaine library says: I have learned a lot from working with farmers. Now I better understand their needs and demands, and can plan the library resources and services according their real desires.

Success Stories

During the focus group discussion with farmers at Klintaine Public Library many inspiring thoughts, conclusions and suggestions for future were talked over.



Photo: Focus group discussion at Klintaine Public Library on November 2, 2012

The following stories were shared by three of the Hand in Hand project participants:

Janis (50 years old) is owner of a medium size farm, including forest. He was one of the most active participants at Klintaine library webinars for farmers. During the seminar on EU grant programs for farmers he got to know about the opportunity to apply for grants for farming equipment. Another seminar provided him knowledge how to better prepare the project proposal. It was soon submitted, as well as the positive reply was received while the seminars still continued. Later, at the webinar on forest management, he improved his knowledge in forestry. Now he uses the new equipment obtained by the grant to effectively operate his forest. Now Janis is convinced that to prepare a project is not that difficult as it seemed before. He is sure that all the documents and information needed for the project proposal, farmers can obtain using all the benefits of the Internet and e-government services, as well as assistance of librarian.

Farmer Liga (in her 60-ties) lives in Aiviekste, a neighboring rural territory. There is a public library with computers and the Internet as well. However, she decided to travel to Klintaine public library as the webinars here were organized for a group of farmers who watched the online broadcast on the big screen. The group helped her to learn and understand the issues easier as she could communicate with other fellows. The webinars here were followed by helpful discussions. For her the most important was the webinar on accounting issues. As the legislation changes, at the webinars Liga had an opportunity to get answers to all the questions essential for her.

Veronika (54 years old) has a small farm. At one of the library webinars she learned that land reclamation maps which are often requested by different authorities can be obtained via Internet. Now she comes to the library and uses the new skill instead of going to the regional center and visiting the State Land Service office. She was also very interested in fruit-tree gardening. She returned to the library to watch the record of the webinar for several times as she wanted to prepare the garden for winter colds exactly how it was instructed by the expert at the webinar.



Photo: The focus group discussion at Klintaine library marked a successful ending of the Hand in Hand project and indicated new beginning of the cooperation with the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre, as well as among local farmers in Klintaine community. They agreed to carry on regular meetings at the library to use any opportunity of continued webinars (further offered by the Centre and Ministry of Agriculture), as well as learning from each other.

For the project's partner Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre (LLKC) involvement in the project opened new doors for reaching farmers and entrepreneurs in rural areas.

Andis Kursitis, head of the Training Centre of LLKC, is convinced: "The cooperation in information exchange started during the project will continue in the future – electronic weekly and monthly bulletins ("Lauku e-Lapa" and "Lauku Lapa") are now being sent out to all rural libraries in Latvia. We are sure that there will be libraries where farmers will come together in their rural libraries to take part in events that are broadcasted via web. In November 2012 a series of conferences organized by Latvian Ministry of Agriculture attracted participants not only in the conference halls but also on the web. The broadcasting of these events was done by LLKC and this would not be possible without the experience we gained during "Hand in Hand" project in cooperation with Klintaine Public Library."

Lessons Learned

Implementing the Hand in Hand project we understood that success of the project depends on several components:

- Project team plays a critical role in all phases of project implementation. Only good cooperation among the team members representing different parties and common understanding of project's goals, as well as the target audience needs leads to a good result.
- Choosing project's partner attention to the partner's expertise, professionalism and capacity shall be paid. Brainstorms and discussions with the partner in the preparation and planning phase of the project bring results during the implementation.

- Involvement of the target audience mostly depends on the librarian. Especially when working with farmers who usually are not the most active library patrons. If the librarian is skilled communicator, interested in promotion of the new service and especially ready to encourage the target group, farmers come.
- Direct communication with the targets is the most appropriate way to involve farmers. Make a phone call, talk to them at the local shop or any other place you meet them. Of course, SMS or e-mail notification is also good. Online information or printed media don't work that well addressing farmer.
- If there is funding available, we suggest arranging a special seminar for target libraries to introduce the project, motivate libraries to get involved in the project, and provide guidelines how to market the project to their patrons.

Project Costs

Part of the funding was used to equip the library with the necessary technical tools that are essential for assisting farmers in their needs and hosting webinars – multimedia projector, screen, printer, web camera, audio system for computer and digital photo camera. For viewing the webinars the library also used the computers purchased within the project “Library comes to user” (the project introduced 2 new library services: laptop lending and providing reference and information via mobile phone).

Since Klintaine Public Library is a one person library many of the services necessary for the project were provided by the project partners on basis of contracts:

- “Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre” (SIA “Latvijas Lauku konsultāciju un izglītības centrs” / LLKC) was responsible for development of the seminar contents and providing the needed lecturers. Project funding enabled LLKC to purchase the necessary sound and lightning equipment.
- State agency “Culture Information Systems” (v/a “Kultūras informācijas sistēmas”) and the public library development project “Father’s Third Son” (“Trešais tēva dēls”/ 3td) in the person of Sandra Vīgante, advocacy and communication manager, provided coordination of internal and external communication, including outreach planning and implementation through the public libraries and was also involved in carrying out the focus group interviews and project evaluation.
- Andrejs Briedis of “Priezukalns” farm was responsible for communication between the Klintaine library and EIFL-PLIP team and drafting and finalizing of the reporting documentation.

Conclusion

The PLIP project Hand in Hand: Enhancing E-inclusion of Farmers at Rural Public Libraries has been a challenge not only for the small Klintaine Public Library but also for all other rural libraries serving small and medium farmers in remote areas. It was a challenge for the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre, too. All together they have proved that public libraries are important information centers offering communities an access to even very specific information such as agriculture and farming.

The most important outcomes of the project are:

- Based on the experience obtained during the PLIP project, the Latvian Rural Advisory and Training Centre, subordinated to the Latvian Ministry of Agriculture, will continue to deliver webinars and see the public libraries as an essential partner in reaching out the farmers in rural areas. The service will in future be financed by the Centre.
- As a result of the project, there are records of 8 thematic webinars available to everyone on the Internet. This will consciously be a valuable resource of knowledge and information for farm owners. The resource will be updated by the Training Centre. The role of libraries will remain as before – to inform their patrons, encourage them to use the opportunity to access useful information and provide the necessary support.