

# Opening a World of Knowledge, Information, and Communication

## Overview

Information technology is a powerful driver of economic and social progress, but there is great inequality in the global distribution of these tools—some people are able to use them but most are not. The result is a severe “digital divide”: Approximately 5 billion people, almost 90 percent of the world’s population, do not have the opportunity to use computers connected to the Internet.

Being able to access the Internet can dramatically improve people’s economic prospects, allowing them to become computer literate, search for jobs, conduct business online, and learn professional skills. People can get connected to valuable information, enabling students to do research, making it easier for families to apply for government services, and empowering individuals to exchange ideas. In countries where reliable health information is hard to find, the Internet can be a vital resource for health workers.

## Our Approach

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Global Libraries initiative is working to open this world of knowledge, information, and communication to many more people. Part of our Global Development Program, this initiative helps public libraries provide free access to computers connected to the Internet and training on how to make full use of these tools. Global Libraries is built on the success of a similar program that connected 99 percent of U.S. public libraries to the Internet.

We work with select countries that are committed to providing access to information technology for all citizens and able to allocate the resources to make this happen. We look for countries where economic growth and improving standards of living, while advantageous to many people, may create or exacerbate a digital divide. A partner country must demonstrate need for the foundation’s support and have a strong library system, solid infrastructure (such as electricity and broadband Internet capabilities), and the leadership, ability, and resources to maintain a nationwide program.



We cannot do this alone. Successful and sustainable programs require the engagement and long-term commitment of government, business, community groups, and others. These partners help set and achieve the national, regional, and local goals that drive the programs. Public libraries, as publicly funded and trusted community learning centers, are key implementation partners. Librarians have the expertise and enthusiasm to help others learn and take full advantage of computers and the Internet.

## What We Do

**Resources:** We provide resources for planning, technical support, and hardware, as well as project management to ensure that library visitors can find and use locally relevant content on the Internet. Our partner, Microsoft, donates software. Partner countries commit resources to update the infrastructure in public libraries, fund librarian salaries and Internet connections, and sustain the programs for years to come.



**Training:** Training is vital to ensure that people understand how to use computers and the Internet in their work, studies, and daily lives. The foundation provides resources for initial training of library staff and visitors throughout the country so that communities can enjoy the full potential of these tools.

**Assessment and Advocacy:** Each country we work in will face very specific—and some unexpected—challenges. There is no standard approach that will work everywhere. We are constantly learning: rigorously assessing the programs' impact, sharing our findings, and modifying our strategies so they are appropriate for each country. The lessons we learn inform efforts to build and maintain support for these programs through partnerships on the local and national levels.

**Recognition:** Through the annual Access to Learning Award, we recognize organizations that have been particularly innovative in providing free access to computers and the Internet. Awardees receive \$1 million award for their work, and we believe that their stories inspire the efforts of other organizations.

Past awardees have included Nepal's Rural Education and Development (2006), an organization that assists rural villages in planning, financing, constructing, and managing community libraries, and Bangladesh's Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha (2005), a group that reaches remote communities with boats converted into mobile libraries and schools.

# Global Libraries Grant Highlights

Topic	Grantee	Purpose	Location(s)
<b>Resources, Training, Assessment, and Advocacy</b>			
Nationwide program and evaluation	Latvia, Ministry of Culture	To implement a nationwide program providing free access to computers connected to the Internet through public libraries, as well as training for librarians and library users. (\$16.2 million over four years)	Latvia
Nationwide program and evaluation	Lithuania, Ministry of Culture	To implement a nationwide program providing free access to computers connected to the Internet through public libraries, as well as training for librarians and library users. (\$17.2 million over four years)	Lithuania
Nationwide program and evaluation	Mexico, National Council on Culture and the Arts (CONACULTA)	To provide free access to computers connected to the Internet and computer training in one-third of Mexico's public libraries. (\$30 million over five years)	Mexico
Planning	Botswana, African Comprehensive HIV/AIDS Partnership	To create a business plan to provide Internet access in public libraries and reading rooms. (\$732,000 over one year)	Botswana
Planning	International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX)	To plan a nationwide program providing free access to computers connected to the Internet through public libraries. (\$1.4 million over one year)	Romania
Research	International Development Research Centre	To research the social and economic impact of increased public access to information and communication technology. (\$7.2 million over five years)	Worldwide

Awardee	Purpose	Location(s)
<b>Recognition—Access to Learning Awards (Sample Awardees)</b>		
Northern Territory Library	To recognize and reward a library system that provides indigenous people living in remote, impoverished communities with technology tools and training. Northern Territory Library is the 2007 Access to Learning Award recipient. (\$1 million)	Australia
Rural Education and Development (READ) Nepal	To recognize and reward an organization that strategically integrates libraries with computer services into development projects. READ Nepal is the 2006 Access to Learning Award recipient. (\$1 million)	Nepal