

Knowledge for the People!

4th Leipzig Library and Information Congress

“Strong Libraries Build Strong Communities” – The Global Libraries Initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

- It's an honor to be here and celebrate libraries and knowledge for the people, as well as talking about the Global Libraries Initiative at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and our work in building strong communities through access to information and technology in public libraries.
- Recently, library colleagues from around the world told us that people don't know what we do in Global Libraries.
- We hope through increased visibility more librarians can benefit from our research and our lessons learned, especially in the areas of impact measurement, learning, and evaluation, as well as enhance their advocacy efforts.
- So thank you my friend Barbara Lison for inviting me to Leipzig to spread the word!

- Today I'll not only speak about our exciting work in Global Libraries, but will end with my own personal reflections 36 years into my career as a library worker.

#### The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

- People sometimes ask why Bill Gates is giving to libraries? Our simple answer is this: Libraries change lives.
- At the foundation we believe access to information and knowledge helps people transform their lives. The work of the entire foundation in libraries, health, agriculture, financial services for the poor, is based on a fundamental belief ***that all lives have equal value, and that every person deserves the right to live a healthy, productive life.***
- The vision of the Global Libraries Initiative is to improve people's lives in developing and transitioning countries through useful, used, and sustainable public access to information and communications technology in public libraries.

- Libraries in both developing and developed nations are at a critical stage. The wide-scale technology revolution has provided enormous opportunities for us to better serve our public.
- As more communities and governments begin to make information resources available electronically, the digital divide is shifting to an opportunity divide. Libraries face a stark choice. They literally must reinvent themselves by embracing technology or they will die.
- Through our work we are seeing the difference strong libraries are making. It is our belief that public libraries promote information equity and literacy both as individual entities, and as a force within cultures.

#### The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Work in Public Libraries

- Most people aren't aware that public libraries were the start of Bill and Melinda Gates' philanthropy.
- In 1997 Bill and Melinda became committed to connecting all U.S. public libraries to the Internet within five years.

- At that time few US libraries were connected to the Internet and there was an ongoing debate about whether public access computers even belonged in libraries!
- But Bill and Melinda were concerned about inequity, and it was increasingly clear in 1997 that the digital divide was real and growing.
- The foundation is a learning organization and the primary lesson learned from the US Library Initiative was that once computers were added, libraries were completely revitalized, becoming vibrant community resources.
- The foundation also learned that without teaching advocacy and government engagement, there was no programmatic sustainability.
- The foundation was determined to replicate the impact seen in the United States in other countries. In 2001 and 2002 we made our first grants outside the US to connect libraries and train librarians in Chile and Mexico.

- In 2005 the Global Libraries program was asked by Bill and Melinda: How would the foundation's investments lead to change in a sustainable and impactful way?
- Our strategy focused on how to best approach working in developing and transitioning countries that had high need (a country that couldn't connect its libraries on its own) and sufficient readiness (a country that could contribute and sustain the investment).
- Based on learnings from the US, Chile, and Mexico, Global Libraries outlined the most important elements for replication.
- Focus areas included impact assessment, advocacy, and long term sustainability.
- Under this strategy grants were approved in Latvia and Lithuania and work was initiated in Botswana, Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, and Vietnam.
- To get a sense of the work underway in the country grants, the foundation created a short film to show the program in Latvia – "Strong

Libraries Build Strong Communities". More than anything this gives a sense of what happens when a country invests in public libraries:

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/topics/Pages/latvia-public-libraries-computers-internet-connections-video.aspx>

- In 2008, Global Libraries went through a process to refine the strategy based on learning to-date. In addition to the key components from the earlier strategy, there were two additional foci: first, "one size does not fit all" and, second, what larger library "environment" is needed to foster the success of libraries?
- The strategy emphasized the need to consider the key components that we saw led to successful and vibrant libraries around the world. The six components, that we call the "library environment" needs are:
  1. **Libraries must meet the needs of their users** by offering:  
useful, relevant information access, content, and services; lifelong learning opportunities; and appropriate user training.
  2. **Library staff must be trained** to be effective in ensuring the success of the library and its public access program. Training also

importantly includes how to engage the community, conduct local outreach, and facilitate social inclusion.

3. **Libraries must offer an inviting public space** where people want to go. They must be accessible, open to all, free or near-free, and the space must be sufficiently functional with electricity, heat, and furniture.

4. **Libraries must demonstrate their impact by measuring their contribution to improving people's lives and communities.**

Through a combination of data and stories, libraries need to show how they meet local needs and priorities to justify continued resources.

5. **Strong library systems and supporting institutions are needed to serve the field effectively, including library administrative units, library associations, and higher-education programs.** These systems and institutions provide a vision for the field, serve as advocates, create opportunities to leverage shared resources, and address critical issues facing libraries and librarians.

6. **Libraries must receive public support from the government and their community of users to help ensure a funding stream over the long term and position themselves as active partners**

**in community development.** Tools for advocacy, measurement, and learning can be used to the advantage of librarians and library systems to help gauge success, understand setbacks, and tell their stories to stakeholders.

### Current Grant Making

- Under our current 2008-2011 strategy we knew there needed to be a mechanism to grant funds other than large country grants since not all developing countries are ready for a wide-scale program like the current ten countries.
- Global Libraries will continue a country-based grant making focus, but will also begin grant making as well support research centered on gaps in the six library environment areas.
- We hope these interventions will lead to sustained benefit either within a single country, a region, or issue/topic.
- We see these grants as an opportunity to impact change at three levels: the individual, library and field level.

- An example of a current “country” environment grant is an impact assessment grant in China.
- An “issue” environment grant is to fund a five-year study by IDRC to study the impact of public access to information and communications technology to help us and the field gain a better understanding of what technology can do to change people’s lives.
- One “topic” focused environment grant to “meet user needs” is a grant called PLIP, the Public Library Innovation awarded to eIFL.net to encourage libraries, governments, and nongovernment organizations in developing and transitioning countries to test new, innovative library services that use technology to meet users’ needs, which can be replicated by others.

### Looking Ahead

- I’m excited about our strategy and the work the Global Libraries team does. I’m excited when I visit libraries around the world because I see substantial, positive change in libraries and the relevant services they provide in their communities.

- Through the passion and commitment of staff, libraries can and do unlock a world of knowledge in a way no other institution can.
- Libraries, in the eyes of Bill and Melinda Gates, are the best intermediaries for ensuring that this value is accessible to all members of society on a sustainable basis.
- This is what you, our colleagues in Germany, and all of our partners around the world, experience each day. You understand the impact libraries have on all levels of society.
- In Global Libraries we work to build stronger partnerships across the private and public sectors, as well as speak up for libraries everywhere.
- Libraries can and do change lives. But it takes all of us, working together, using our voices loudly and powerfully. We must learn to speak more strongly about libraries, about our impact, and our importance.
- We are at a critical place in our history and we need to immediately and radically change our approach in the way we provide service and the way we advocate or we will become obsolete, and the libraries we

love and the world of information we have at our fingertips – will no longer exist.

- I believe we have the power to overcome this and can keep libraries alive, rather than allow them to become musty museums of old books.
- The value and ability of libraries to benefit individuals have remained unseen and underappreciated for far too long.
- Right now I believe we are so much more than ever before. We still are the magnificent library of our childhood, but that's only the beginning.
- I love libraries and librarians deeply and with a passion that still gives me a daily thrill.
- But it's not enough to give great, relevant, innovative service, to come to conferences and talk to each other.
- We need tens of thousands of us out on the streets, sitting at every community, national, European Union table, and talking about libraries... and our importance in hardcore terms, with data and stories about impact.

- I strongly believe there is no time better than now to be a librarian. We are, if committed, able to radically transform and reinvent libraries. Right now, people desperately need information and technology and there is no institution better suited to do this work than libraries.
- This is the moment to renew, revitalize, and transform ourselves and our libraries. And through that revitalization, people will understand that libraries are indispensable.
- We also have the opportunity to change the image of libraries and librarians, and raise respect for our work.
- Imagine for a moment what life will be like when we unlock and unleash the potential of libraries.
- Bill and Melinda Gates began their philanthropy with public libraries and they continue making an investment in libraries because THEY believe in what we do and the impact we have.
- All of us should be using Bill and Melinda's belief in the importance of libraries as part of our advocacy campaigns to make sure people

understand that libraries must be on the agenda as we are **THE** only institution with the mandate to change lives through free access to information and knowledge.

- This is OUR time, this is our opportunity – let's do this together!

Thank you.