From Editor's Desk

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND DIGITAL INDIA

Recently the Government of India launched the *Digital India* campaign, which aims to ensure that Government services are made available to citizens electronically by improving online infrastructure and by enhancing and extending Internet connectivity. Naturally the initiative includes plans to connect rural areas with high-speed data networks. If one reads through the goals and objectives of the programme it becomes clear that the idea is to transform India into a knowledge society. It is a programme to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. The programme is to be implemented in phases. The vision of digital India is centered on [1]:

- Digital infrastructure as a utility to every citizen

- Governance & services on demand

- Digital empowerment of citizens

While expanding the digital infrastructure is an essential requirement to realize the aims of Digital India, digital empowerment of citizens, generating relevant information in local languages and scripts and making such digital information accessible to all, especially to citizens living in rural areas will be major requirements for the success of the programme. The Government has plans to extend access to digital information to all by expanding the coverage of Common Services Centres. Perhaps the Government of India and the concerned ministries should also consider the existing network of public libraries in the country as gateways to provide access to digital information services and / or to locate Common Services Centres. Some of the states that have enacted public library legislation have reasonably good network of public libraries extending even to remote rural areas, e.g., Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra, Telengana, Kerala and West Bengal, to mention a few. It will be a good and cost effective idea to use the available physical infrastructure in the form of public libraries to locate community service centres as part of the digital India initiative. The one strong reason to consider public libraries as the most appropriate agencies to move forward the Digital India initiative is because libraries are non-threatening

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environments where people, irrespective of age, gender and other factors, can feel free to have discussions and ask questions.

In this context it is relevant to note some of the innovative services that public libraries in some of the developing countries have introduced.

Some village libraries in the Tuy Province of Burkina Faso are teaching teenage girls to use smart phones to access health information online. In every library, librarians and midwives are organizing girls' health clubs where girls are learning to use smart phones to search the Internet; to create short e-books about health issues, and to set up a health blog and share information with their peers. Under a programme labeled as CODE Ethiopia, rural community libraries are helping to develop literacy by creating e-books for pre-school children. In Ghana the Northern Regional Library's Internet Access and Training Programme provides ICT and leadership training to vulnerable unemployed youth. During 2010-11 the library trained 190 youth (125 women and 65 men) and the library is now a recognized player in local development programmes; it also organizes monthly public lectures and debates to make people understand the value of ICT in addressing community needs in areas like health, empowerment and education of women. In the same country the Volta Regional Library's mobile library service equipped with solar power takes low voltage laptop computers to schools in under-developed villages in the Region so that children can get hands on computer experience. In Kenya Children use tablets at the Busia Community Library to access educational content linked to the school curriculum. The Masiphumelele Community Library's ICT training and employment information service has trained over 1500 beginner and intermediate ICT students, and has helped build young people's skills, confidence and employability. In Serbia, a public library under a project known as Biblioteka++ project teaches children and youth in the age group 10-24 basic and advanced computer coding skills. In Romania, a public library programme titled 'App Library', reaches out to teenagers and prepares them for a future in which digital technology, media and information are increasingly important.

There are many more examples of innovative public library programmes aimed at digital empowerment of their members.

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There are interesting and valuable lessons both for our public libraries and for those in charge of implementing Digital India programmes in the public library initiatives mentioned above.

REFERENCES

[1] ww.cmai.asia/digitalindia/pdf/Digital-India-DeITY-Details.pdf

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