

Chapter 27

Public Access ICT in Moldova

OPINIA and Independent Sociological and Information Service
Republic of Moldova

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter investigates public access to information venues in the Republic of Moldova. The chapter was written as a component of the 25-country Public Access to Information and Communication Venues research project sponsored by the University of Washington, USA. The project focuses specifically on the information needs to underserved communities, the role of ICT, and public access to information and communication venues in Moldova. It aims to provide a detailed analysis of these venues based on data generated through surveys conducted among the targeted users and operators, in-depth interviews, and focus groups discussions with key informants, site visits, and analysis of secondary data, including relevant country and sector studies.

It presents new empirical knowledge about the key public access venues, their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, information needs of the population, with a particular focus on underserved communities. This is an important issue

to study because Moldova's social and economic regeneration and the establishment of sustainable human development processes depends on the public access to information and communication technologies, and their ability dynamically to adapt to the nation's rapidly increasing needs and demands.

Since 1991, Moldova has experienced a dramatic decline in economic and social well-being and is faced with becoming the poorest country in Europe. More than a third of the population is thought to be working abroad as migrant laborers. The research contained in this paper describes ways in which key public access venues are influenced by the transformations Moldova has experienced in the last decade within the existing economic, policy, and regulatory environment.

The results of the research conducted in Moldova are valuable in enabling government and other agencies to develop policies to strengthen public access to information and communication technologies, especially for underserved communities.

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Methodology

This study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the study team collected general descriptive data from the available sources, including the latest statistical data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Information Development, as well as available national and sector studies and sociological reports.

Additionally, the team conducted 12 in-depth interviews with key informants using an interview guide. Key informants for this project were broadly defined to include representatives of the National Library Council, the civil society, public officials from the Ministry of Information Development, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and others.

The second phase was conducted among the targeted users and operators of the main local public access venues, and included interviews and focus-group discussions among key informants and stakeholders, as well as site visits. The fieldwork was conducted in June 2008.

For purposes of the study, the key venues selected were places where shared, public, and unrestricted access to information was available, both with and without information and communication technologies (ICTs). The venues selected were public libraries, Internet cafés, telecommunication centers, and NGOs. To best generate the desired information, the project incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis.

The study areas for the project were selected while considering a range of five important aspects: 1) the present urban and rural areas, 2) the nation's present administrative and regional representation, 3) the socio-economic conditions of the communities, 4) the ethnic composition of the population, and 5) the ability to demonstrate a fairly diverse set of views and attitudes that can be described in relative depth among key stakeholders via qualitative methods.

For the quantitative analysis, the team interviewed 1092 users and 37 operators. For the qualitative analysis, the team interviewed 44 persons.

Findings

The following principal findings are the result of the research:

- During the period of transition, the public library system suffered from the overall economic regression, which has had a significant negative impact on public access to information.
- Because of poor local budgets, severe socio-economic problems, especially in rural areas, public libraries have not received adequate funding. Thus, most rural public libraries for adults and children were merged, while others were closed entirely. Furthermore, due to the lack of funds, the offices of public libraries were not repaired for many years; the furniture is old and damaged and needs to be replaced. Public libraries, especially in rural areas, are functioning without heating during the winter, and there are localities where public libraries have no electricity. Salaries of librarians are low even by Moldavian standards.
- Technologies, services, and information offered in the public libraries are inappropriate for the user's needs, especially for underserved communities. Accordingly, there is a huge gap between user needs and actual services. A large quantity of the available funds for books cannot be used because of ideological or linguistic considerations.
- There is an uneven development of libraries among the libraries in Moldova. The capital city, Chisinau, retains most of the funding, technical equipment, and expertise public access to information.

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