

# Chapter 28

## Public Access ICT in Georgia

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Georgia was a key republic in the former Soviet Union until gaining independence in 1989. Like many of the other former component republics, Georgia then faced an uncertain future and entered a lingering state of political, social, and economic turmoil. Successive government administrations have struggled to overcome these issues and have instituted a number of reforms, but so far, the reforms have experienced only limited success. Many of the reforms directly affect public access to information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Georgia has not kept pace with the processes of developing access to information that have occurred in much of the rest of the world, and this is particularly true when compared to other European countries that have more favorable political and socio-economic positions. As an example, telecommunications and ICTs that lean heavily on landline access are unavailable in much of the remote rural regions because the infrastructure has

not been maintained following the armed conflicts that have erupted on several occasions.

Because of the unusual conditions that exist in Georgia, the country was selected to be one of the 25 countries to participate in this investigative study that was designed both to assess the ability of the public to access information and communication venues, and also to review the role of ICTs across the overall economic, political, and regulatory framework in Georgia. The researchers assessed how the venues function, how they serve user needs, how they meet operational constraints, and how they realize successes.

The research team identified public libraries, Internet cafés, and the National Library of the Parliament of Georgia as the most important providers of public access to information and selected them as the primary objects of this study. The study focuses on these venues with regard to access, capacity, and environment based on in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, secondary data analysis, focus group discussions with venue users and operators, site visits, and a quantitative survey. Special attention was given to inequities

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and information needs of underserved communities and to the regulatory environment.

## **Methodology**

When this study was designed and initiated in 2008, the research effort conducted in Georgia was aligned in two phases. In the first phase, the research team identified the venue types that were determined to be making the most important contributions to the public's access to information. Public libraries, Internet cafés, and the National Library were selected after considering the results of interviews with persons who were identified as knowledgeable in the field, and based on 25 subsequent in-depth interviews with key stakeholders to obtain detailed information for each venue type. The information gathered through the various interviews was supplemented by information gathered in six focus-group discussions with venue employees and users, as well as from the results of 14 site visits, secondary data analyses, and a field survey of 792 users.

## **Findings**

Before this study began, there was a commonly held presumption that a huge difference existed between the abilities of urban and rural Georgians to gain access to information and ICTs. For the most part, the presumption proved to be true. The unequal distribution of venues and information sources between urban and rural regions emerged as one of the most obvious inequity variables. It also became equally apparent that people in the larger communities have better access than those who live in smaller communities. The limited access in rural areas is often a direct result of the geography – people living in high mountainous regions and other remote sites are the most underserved groups.

In addition to the physical location of the venues, ethnicity also is an important variable

affecting public access to information, especially among ethnic minorities.

Georgia has 1,396 public libraries, and of that total, 1,218 are located in rural settlements. In terms of size and type, public libraries were divided into two groups: 1) Central public libraries serving the districts located in urban areas, and 2) smaller libraries in the villages and cities that are under the supervision of the central libraries. There are 65 defined districts in Georgia, each of which has a central library. Approximately 123 more libraries similar in size to central libraries are located in various cities across the nation.

The government of Georgia is working to improve and expand the public library system with the intent to establish the entire system as an important public source of information. As this study was being conducted, this well-intentioned program was still under development, but as the program evolved, it appeared that the net result would be a reduction in the total number of libraries in the system. The government plan suggested that several small neighboring libraries might be combined to form larger facilities.

Internet cafés can be found in many communities, but the research team was unable to locate any definitive estimates of the total number of these small public venues. By far, the vast majority of them are located in urban areas. A recent settlement infrastructure survey conducted by IPM showed that out of a proportionally selected group of 52 small cities, 35 have at least one Internet café. The survey also showed that of the 667 surveyed villages, only four appeared to have Internet cafés; however, each of the largest cities, without exception, has several.

The cost to use the services offered at Internet cafés is often too high for most potential users, especially among the lowest levels of the economic scale. Although as some respondents noted, Internet cafés are perceived to be an important source for anyone seeking the most current information and content produced in foreign countries.

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