LMI Kyrgyzstan - eCenters

7/05-9/06
Status: Ongoing

Background

Last Mile Initiative

USAID's Last Mile Initiative (LMI)is a global program to expand the access of the rural poor to communications. Launched in April 2004, LMI intends to spur increases in productivity and transform the development prospects of farmers, small business, new startups and other organizations in rural areas presently underserved by the world's major voice and data telecommunications networks.

Six countries were selected to participate in LMI in the inaugural year. Fifteen additional countries, including Kyrgyzstan, were selected in 2005.

Kyrgyzstan Context

Without the advantage of oil revenue or other marketable natural resources, Kyrgyzstan's development has been modest in comparison to resource-rich countries such as neighboring Kazakhstan. Recent political turmoil underscores the need to create better communication linkages between rural areas and larger cities. Over 60% of Kyrgyzstan's population lives in rural areas where many subsistence farmers struggle to find potable water.

Social tensions could be relaxed if reliable and affordable communications were created between the central government and rural constituencies. The dot-ORG team determined that LMI resources could be used to great advantage in secondary cities (e.g. 20,000 people and above) to support such efforts as conflict mitigation, improving SME and citizen awareness about laws and taxation issues, and enabling citizens to use new payment mechanisms (e.g. for utilities).

Project objectives

The project's objective is to stimulate the creation of four private sector-led "eCenters" in Kyrgyzstan. The eCenters are stimulating access to information and communications technology (ICT), improving economic growth, bolstering efforts toward conflict mitigation and leading to non-traditional employment training and job creation. The eCenters differ from traditional telecenters in that they promote competition among communities to offer "land grants" that can bring near-term health, learning, employment, and governance benefits within reach of residents. In projects selected by dot-ORG, the land grants create assets and build local purchasing power for eCenter services, such as:

- Human Resources, e.g. training programs and workshops in ICTs, foreign languages, accounting, etc. To this end, the eCenters deploy community-level "microstipends" for residents to obtain global telemedicine services as well as new online language, business, and technical skills training and certifications;
- Local economic development support services, e.g. acting as an information resource for local businesses and municipalities;
- Tourism support, e.g. promoting tourist attractions, guest facilities, destination marketing and tourism services capacity development;
- Content development and dissemination in a wide range of sectors, including agribusiness, health, teacher training, and civil society development.

Photo: A pensioner in a rural community describes the burden of paying high telephone rates to make calls to her son in the army.

Implementation

Activities to date

Launch of eCenters in December 2005

The LMI project in Kyrgyzstan celebrated the grand opening of all four eCenters in the month of December 2005. Regional governors and local mayors welcomed the eCenters to their communities as tools that enhance their local economic development and overall competitiveness.

The opening of the eCenters was widely covered in the local and national media. The media coverage helped drive local interest project participation.

Competitions were held in each community to distribute microstipends as prizes. This approach is in keeping with the eCenters model for developing a competitive knowledge workforce in secondary towns and cities.

Demand Study Completed in November 2005

A key activity performed in November 2005,was the issuance of a demand study in each community. The study indicated strong local interest in web-based English language training (ESL) and in basic computer literacy courses. Demand for basic accounting was also highlighted.

Micro-stipends for Students & Local Entrepreneurs

Each eCenter operator is currently being trained in offering microstipends to local students and entrepreneurs. The micro-stipend program is continuing to be promoted through the local media and schools to reach out to the community and to promote the eCenter as a place to learn computer literacy and to access web-based learning resources.

First Training Sessions

Preparations for providing the first trainings on international accounting are underway in Kara-Suu and Karakol. These trainings are offered jointly with PRAGMA's EDP project and are expected to begin January 2006. Students who successfully complete these 3-week trainings will receive a certificate.

The Academy for Educational Development's local Center for International Training (CIT) office is currently developing a Local Economic Development (LED) training program for local administrators and entrepreneurs. The eCenters will offer LED training later in 2006.

Connectivity

Since the project began in July 2005, two of the four eCenters now have high-speed Internet access via Kyrgyz Telecom's ADSL network. The remaining eCenters in Karakol, Bosteri and Naryn currently rely on dial-up access. AED/dot-ORG is currently negotiating with several VSAT and BGAN providers in possibly offering wireless high-speed access to the remaining eCenters. Planned activities in the near term include further distributing microstipends and in developing a training curricula based on the demands outlined in the recent study.

Partners

The Civil Initiative on Internet Policy (CIIP), a Kyrgyz based NGO, will coordinate the project during its initial 18-month pilot phase.

Openworld Learning will develop and provide toolkits and model business plans for local private and public sector champions. These tools will help structure land-grant-enabled projects to:

- promote high bandwidth telecommunications access to the designated land grant areas;
- endow local micro-voucher funds for grassroots access to new telemedicine and eLearning resources, and;
- increase the ability of public sector bodies to connect directly with Kyrgyz citizens.

Strategies

The project partners will organize Kyrgyz and international providers of affordable telemedicine and online skills development and certification opportunities on an introductory basis in affiliation with the selected Kyrgyz eCenter initiatives.

The project will also implement strategies to ensure the sustainability of the eCenters. For example, the eCenters will receive guidance on forming an association to share best practices, aggregate their procurements, help coordinate technical support, and serve as the eCenters' collective voice in important forums.

The eCenters will also be encouraged to deploy innovative uses of connectivity – e.g. acting as a reseller of connectivity via wireless to small businesses and local governments, donor agencies, etc.

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Photo: Rural Kyrgyzstan offers unusual tourism opportunities – including spending the night in a local "yurt".

LINKS on the DOT-COM website

- Kyrgyzstan eCenters Activity page

- Overview of dot-ORG's LMI Activities

- eCenters Sustainability Toolkit