The library uses information and communication technology (ICT) to improve the lives of fruit, vegetable and livestock farmers living in six villages around El Retiro in Colombia’s Antioquia district.

The ICT for Rural Development service –
• Increased numbers of people from farming communities using ICT at the library, from 20 in 2011 to 150 in 2012.
• Sparked interest in new income-generating activities – through the internet, women farmers learnt how to make handbags from recycled cloth. A group now meets every week to make bags and to research marketing opportunities online.
• Raised visibility of the library with local farmers’ associations, for example, the Association of Avocado Producers of El Retiro, whose members are now sharing knowledge via email, blogs and You Tube.
• Won an award for outstanding contribution to rural development.
• Led to formation of a group of five institutions, including public libraries and other information service providers, to work together to develop impact research methodology to assess the contribution of public libraries to community development.

Community need
ICT is rare in El Retiro and in the villages of Pantanillo, La Amapola, Pantalio, Tabacal, Los Medios and Nazareth. Laboratorio del Espiritu – the only library serving these villages – has 12 computers, but farmers do not come to the library regularly because they do not have digital skills or realize the potential of ICT to improve their livelihoods. They are therefore missing out on vital information, for example, about farming methods and market opportunities. Also, the terrain is rugged, public transport is poor and farming communities are isolated from each other and the outside world. The library saw the potential of ICT to increase access to information and improve community communications.
With a grant of US$15,000 from EIFL-PLIP to cover training costs, technical support, web design and transport for one year, the library initiated their programme for farmers. They began by launching an intensive marketing campaign, using mobile phone text messages, radio and TV, to encourage farmers to come to the library for free ICT training.

In less than a year, the library...
• Trained 130 people to use computers, to research the internet and use email and social networking tools.
• Built trainees’ audiovisual skills – taking photographs and making videos.
• Created a lively service blog where farmers and their families now share experiences and upload photographs and videos.
• Trained 20 people to produce radio programming for a future community radio station.

The future
Farmers in other villages have requested ICT training, and the library will use part of their Civic Development Corporation/Medellin Rotary Club award to strengthen and expand the service. To take ICT to people in more remote villages, the library plans to introduce a mobile training service, working with the Metropolitan Network of Libraries. Further plans to improve community communication include establishing a community radio station, working with ASENRED (the Association of Radio Stations of Eastern Antioquia) and local schools.

The EIFL-PLIP grant was awarded in November 2011. A year later, the library assessed the impact of the service. Information presented here is based on the library’s impact assessment. For further information contact Mr Fernando Hoyos – elmundodelcampoentic@gmail.com.

“[I] had never touched a computer in my life, and I confess, I felt very nervous at first, but then I lost my fear. I even created my own address and was able to communicate and relate to other people, with the wonder of these devices!” – Blanca Villegas Olivia Franco, avocado farmer, after attending 18 computer classes.

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