



TRANSFORMING  
PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN  
**KENYA**

Six years of partnership between EIFL  
and Kenya National Library Services  
reaches a major milestone

*Photo provided by KNLS*



## ALL PUBLIC LIBRARIES PROVIDE FREE PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

“I have witnessed massive transformation of public libraries in Kenya. In the past, they were seen as reading rooms. Today, they are spaces offering free access to ICT and many different opportunities. EIFL has been with us all the way on this incredible journey.”

– RICHARD ATUTI, DIRECTOR, KENYA NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE

In October 2016, 41 young Kenyans were awarded certificates after completing an eight-week online course in web design and resume writing at their local public library.

Dan Momanyi, a learner in Nakuru Public Library's Learning Circle Programme, was one of the certificated learners. He is starting a small web development company: “The skills I have learnt in the library, and the certificate, which confirms that I have successfully completed the course, will give me an advantage in the market. The library has put me on the right path,” he said.

Just six years ago, it would not have been possible for Dan to take an online course at his public library. In 2010, fewer than five of Kenya's 61 public libraries had internet connections or computers for public use.

In the perception study of public libraries in Kenya commissioned by EIFL in 2010, the majority of library users and non-users saw libraries as places for books and children to do their homework. Just 7% of people surveyed associated libraries with information and communications technology (ICT).

Today, all 61 public libraries in the Kenya National Library Service (KNLS) network have 10 or more computers that are connected to the internet, and which are free for the public to use. The number of people using libraries increased dramatically with the arrival of computers and the internet. Over half a million people have used computers and the internet in their local libraries in the last four years.

### A REMARKABLE JOURNEY

The transformation of libraries in Kenya has been remarkable, and EIFL is proud to have been a partner with KNLS, the body that develops and manages libraries in Kenya, on this journey.

Guided by the findings of the perception study, EIFL and KNLS developed a strategy for changing public and government perceptions of public libraries. The strategy included advocacy, capacity building of public librarians, and development of new public library services that address community information needs.

The strategy worked. In February 2016, KNLS announced that the Communications

Authority of Kenya had agreed to equip the remaining 46 public libraries with computers and the internet.

EIFL's capacity building initiative, which included basic and advanced ICT as well as new service development and management skills, ensured that public librarians were prepared for the roll-out of equipment.

“I have visited a number of primary and secondary schools; I have also visited our local government offices to tell them all about the new services that the library is offering through use of the internet. As a result, many new groups of people are coming to the library, and our library membership has increased,” said Kateta Eunice Ngina, a librarian at KNLS Werugha Community Library.

### FARMERS' INFORMATION

Working with the Ministry of Agriculture and the University of Nairobi, KNLS is now providing an information service for the country's 4.5 million farmers. Through the National Farmers' Information Service (NAFIS), farmers can get information online or by phone about government extension

services, farming methods, markets and market prices.

The NAFIS server is hosted in KNLS Buruburu Public Library, and an agricultural information officer from the Ministry has been appointed to liaise with KNLS to ensure that NAFIS content is up to date and that farmer inquiries are answered. Librarians at all 61 KNLS libraries reach out to farmers, encourage them to come to the library, and show them how to access the service.

“Through the use of ICT in my library, a vegetable farmers' association has greatly improved their farming. They visit the library every Friday to search for information. Before, they used to plant only spinach and sukuma wiki (collard greens). Now they are also planting pumpkins after learning that pumpkins can do well here in Taita-Taveta County,” said a librarian at KNLS Werugha Community Library.

### HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

In 2010, with EIFL support, two KNLS libraries, Kisumu and Eldoret, set up health information services. In less than a year, the two libraries trained over 1,600 health

workers, students and members of the public to use ICT to access online health resources.

The idea caught on, and today, there are health hubs in 15 KNLS libraries, where health workers, medical students and members of the public can use rich collections of books and find information online.

Public libraries participate in government health campaigns, for example, on topics like HIV/AIDS, malaria prevention and the importance of good nutrition. They have also allied with academic health libraries to improve overall health literacy of the public, with a particular focus on non-communicable diseases, like cancer and diabetes.

Libraries regularly partner with nearby hospitals and clinics to host health awareness events for the general public, and have become important meeting spaces for people who have health issues in common and who have formed support groups.

“We have become recognized by the health sector. In May 2016 we organized a medical camp that attracted over 2,000 health workers, academics, students and members of the general public,” said Moses Imbayi, a librarian at KNLS Kisumu Public Library.

### QUALITY EDUCATION

In 2012, EIFL supported an education project in KNLS Kibera Public Library. The library received tablet computers pre-loaded with curriculum content, tests and other educational content in fun formats like animations and puzzles, and started classes for children from schools in Kibera, a giant slum on the outskirts of Nairobi.

After a year, over 50% of the children who attended classes in the library reported that their school test results in English, mathematics and science had improved.

The project won international recognition, and KNLS received funding from an international agency to replicate the project in five more libraries.

As well as using tablet computers, KNLS libraries are increasingly integrating e-readers into educational services for children. To date, KNLS has distributed 2,100 e-readers and 175 tablet computers to 40 libraries. KNLS plans to equip all the libraries in its network with e-readers with books for children and adults in Kiswahili and English.

“Digital technology has changed the way we work. We are able to offer a greater variety of services to people in our community, for example supporting children who are struggling at school,” said Mary Kinyanjui, librarian at KNLS Kibera Public Library.

### DIGITAL SKILLS

Poor digital literacy remains a key barrier to internet use today, according to the most recent surveys conducted on the African continent. Public libraries have an important role to play in providing access to digital technology and teaching people to use it.

Public librarians in the KNLS network have trained 170,000 people to use ICT since 2012. In addition to providing training, librarians assist individuals to find information online, to access e-government services and complete tax returns, and to apply for university courses or look for jobs.

“I am proud to be empowered to offer ICT training to other people and to be able to help them use software like Word, Excel and email. I am able to change others through this training,” a librarian from KNLS Meru Public Library told us.

KNLS has also recently entered into a partnership with Microsoft, and KNLS

libraries have become access points for the Microsoft Imagine Academy, which grants industry-recognized certificates for people who complete technology skills courses. “This is a great opportunity, especially for Kenyan youth, to develop their technology skills and get globally recognized certificates right in their village,” said KNLS Director, Richard Atuti.

### THE FUTURE

KNLS is open to new partnerships that will use public library ICT in programmes and initiatives to meet community information needs.

“Libraries must innovate and transform or they will become irrelevant to the community,” said Mr Atuti.

## EIFL'S WORK WITH PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN KENYA

**2010**  
• Commissioned research ‘Perceptions of public libraries in Kenya’

• Health services launched at Eldoret & Kisumu libraries

**2011**  
• Released findings of ‘Perceptions of public libraries in Kenya’

**2012**  
• Advocacy campaign for government investment in library ICT

**2013**  
• Tablet-based children's education services launched at Kibera & Busia libraries

**2014**  
• Launched capacity building initiative for 29 public libraries

**2016**  
• 29 libraries report providing digital skills training to 20,000 people

• 29 libraries report helping 220,000 individual library users to use ICT

• ICT learning services for deaf and autistic children launched at Meru library

• Services for visually impaired students launched at Nairobi Area library

• Virtual Online Math learning programme launched at Nakuru library

• ‘Learning Circles’ launched at Buruburu & Nakuru libraries

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