eIFL.net and access to knowledge in the Western Balkans

eIFL overview

eIFL.net (www.eifl.net) started in 1999 as an initiative of the Open Society Institute (OSI), a private grant-making and operating foundation, part of the Soros Foundation network. Its goal was to bring affordable access to e-resources to the countries in its network through cooperation with local libraries, thus eIFL.net's first focus was on the former Soviet Union countries, Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe as well as some countries in Africa and Asia. For this multi-country initiative, the national site license model was adopted: for the stated price per country, an unlimited number of libraries could register for access and an unlimited number of users could use the services simultaneously. With this model, the intention was not only to address the growing digital divide between East and West, North and South, but also to ensure equitable access to knowledge within each country. Libraries have traditionally guaranteed public and unrestricted access to information and therefore have a fundamental role to play in the development of democratic societies by enabling all members of the community to access global educational resources, ideas and opinions. By doing so, they expand information literacy, contribute to economic development and help create strong civil societies.

In 2003, eIFL.net became an independent foundation, incorporated in the Netherlands and with a central office in Rome, Italy. Over the last few years eIFL.net has carried out several waves of membership enlargement as well as program diversification. Thus, while negotiations with publishers to provide access to educational electronic resources at affordable prices and fair conditions for library users and the support to sustainable national library consortia remain at the core of its mission, nowadays eIFL.net offers other programs to its membership in the areas of Open Access and Institutional Repositories Copyright for libraries, Free and Open Source Software for libraries, as well as many Knowledge sharing and networking activities.

eIFL.net member library consortia take part in all or just some of these core programs according to their needs, priorities and degree of development. Currently eIFL.net includes library consortia in 50 countries in Central, Eastern and South-east Europe, former Soviet Union, Africa, the Middle-East and South-east Asia (see the complete list at http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/country), although its vision is to embrace many more poor, developing and transition countries in the pursuit of global access to knowledge and information.

The six pillars of eIFL.net:

1. Negotiating licenses to e-resources

eIFL.net provides affordable access to electronic journals and databases through collective negotiations on behalf of its member countries with publishers and aggregators. Our negotiations cover not only pricing, but also establishing fair terms and conditions for access to those resources by library users in developing and transitional countries.

eIFL.net has produced a model contract and a model license for arrangements negotiated with individual publishers. eIFL member countries can access a wide host of high quality scholarly e-resources at highly discounted prices or for free in the case of least developed countries. Up to now, eIFL has reached agreements with top scientific publishers that cover all research disciplines, including Institute of Physics, BioOne, SAGE, Thomson Gale Publishing, Encyclopaedia Britannica, CSIRO, American Physical Society, Royal Society, Cambridge University Press

Journals and Oxford University Press Journals and e-Content and many more (please see the complete list of e-resources negotiated at http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/services/negotiations.

What is more, electronic content available to libraries of eIFL member countries continues to grow at a rapid pace, as many publishers approach eIFL willing to establish cooperation. eIFL model contract and model licence are used in all agreements with publishers.

2. Supporting the creation of sustainable national library consortia

A central part of eIFL.net's mission is to assist in the building of sustainable national library consortia. A wide range of activities underpin this goal, including: training, national and regional workshops and meetings, individual country visits, grants, attendance at local events organized by national consortia, manuals, and web resources. eIFL.net in discussion with the country coordinator tailors the activity to the appropriate stage of development of the country consortium.

3. Open access publishing and the building of institutional repositories of local content

Through the eIFL-open access program, eIFL.net members build capacity on issues relating to Open Access to scholarly communications to permit libraries and their users to benefit from the content which is increasingly being made freely available through Open Access. This goal is addressed by the development of Open Access repositories and by encouraging authors within each country to publish their articles in Open Access journals. eIFL.net supports both the Directory of Open Access journals DOAJ which now contains more than 2700 scholarly journals, and the Directory of Open Access Repositories networking more than 1000 repositories of around the world, including a growing number from eIFL.net countries.

4. Intellectual property rights and libraries

The goal of eIFL-IP "Advocacy for Access to Knowledge: copyright and libraries" is to protect and promote the interests of libraries relating to copyright issues in eIFL member countries. A network of library copyright specialists focuses upon building capacity amongst the eIFL.net library community and advocates for national and international copyright law reform. The overall vision of eIFL-IP is that eIFL.net librarians will become strong voices for fair and balanced copyright laws and leaders in promoting access to knowledge in the digital age.

5. Free and open source software (FOSS) for libraries

eIFL-FOSS is dedicated to helping libraries take advantage of the benefits of free and open source software. Our first major undertaking is to assist libraries in member countries to install or migrate to integrated library systems based on open source software. In order to do so, eIFL FOSS will produce related training and educational material, will conduct pilot projects in selected eIFL countries and will also integrate the local communities of FOSS experts into the international movement that advocates for the promotion and application of open source software.

6. Knowledge sharing and networking

Sharing information and knowledge is essential to capacity building and sustainable development. To this end, eIFL.net has developed into a vibrant global community of professionals interacting in different ways: within national library consortia, in expert networks such as eIFL-IP or eIFL-OA, and by geographic and linguistic regions (eIFL-Africa or eIFL-Russian speaking countries). At the

core of eIFL.net's mission and underpinning its growing range of activities is the sharing of knowledge at all levels – global, national, local – in all areas relevant to eIFL.net's activities.

eIFL.net work in the Western Balkan countries

eIFL.net has been working with the local communities of libraries in the Western Balkan region since its beginnings in the late 1990s, as its primary geographic focus was on Eastern and South-eastern European countries together with the former Soviet Union. After nearly 10 years of regular collaboration with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia, eIFL.net has acquired a sound knowledge of libraries and communication technologies in the region. We have witnessed a continued progress in the modernization of libraries and an enhanced inclusion into the global information society despite a considerable number of challenges to be addressed yet. These efforts have allowed local library consortia to participate in the whole range of eIFL.net programs actively, an encouraging signal that reflects a broadening of their capacities and the growing agenda of their member institutions.

As a broad regional overview, when eIFL.net started to cooperate with the region, access and dissemination of information was lagging behind in respect with their Western neighbours due to several reasons, ranging from external factors, such as the worsening economic and communications infrastructure conditions resulting from the war years in the 1990s, and policymaking priorities in the agenda of post-war governments, whereby education, information technologies and research issues were somewhat relegated after more pressing national needs. At the same time, insufficient linkages with the education and research systems of other countries in the region and internationally contributed to lower the profile of cultural and education institutions to a remarkable degree[1].

The very early steps of collaboration focused on enabling access to EBSCO databases, the first aggregator with whom eIFL.net negotiated collective agreements on behalf of its member countries Ever since, eIFL.net has been facilitating access to a growing and diversified set of electronic collections, as this has been the number one request by Western Balkan libraries as we know from regular surveys. Actually, eIFL.net negotiations with publishers are often perceived by these countries as its single most beneficial service as they yield huge e-journal subscription savings for libraries, which in many cases exceed 95% of market prices.

Thanks to these negotiations, Western Balkan countries have been able to broaden very considerably the online content available for their education and research communities. Looking at the take-up of resources negotiated by eIFL.net, the library consortia in Serbia and Slovenia have experienced the biggest improvement in their capacity to purchase subscriptions. Albania, UNMIK/Kosova, Republic of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina steadily continue to expand the availability of e-resources althoughquite often, budget constraints go hand in hand with connectivity deficiencies and general infrastructure needs.

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[1] The few exceptions here have been the COBISS (Co-operative Online Bibliographic System & Services, http://www.cobiss.net/) software and the shared cataloguing platform used in Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, the Internet-connectivity SEREEN (South Eastern European Research and Education Networking, http://www.geant.net/server/show/conWebDoc.1237) project which includes Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro as partners, and the SEE-GRID (South-Eastern European GRId–enabled eInfrastructure Development, http://www.see-grid.org/) project to support effective digital integration of the region with the rest of Europe.

Providing assistance in the building and development of local library consortia became the second pillar of eIFL.net work in the Western Balkans. This program began with the explicit objective of encouraging the organization of local libraries under coordinated efforts in order to share costs, avoid overlapping of initiatives and level up their bargaining status *vis-à-vis* the information industry. In fact, by engaging with the country-wide community of libraries, eIFL.net has enabled the building of national library consortia in Albania ("Consortium of Albanian Libraries", with a membership of 24 libraries), Bosnia-Herzegovina ("Electronic Information Consortium for Libraries in Bosnia and Herzegovina», EICBH, http://www.eicbih.ba/eicbih/index.php, with a membership of 24 libraries), UNMIK/Kosova ("Consortium of Electronic Libraries in Kosova" CELK, http://www.biblioteka-ks.org/, with a membership of 19 libraries), Republic of Macedonia ("Macedonian Electronic Libraries", MEL, http://w3.nubsk.edu.mk/, with a membership of 13 libraries), Serbia ("Serbian Library Consortium for Coordinated Acquisition", KoBSON, http://nainfo.nbs.bg.ac.yu/kobson/page/, with a membership of 151 libraries) and Slovenia ("Consortium of Slovene Electronic Collections", COSEC, http://www.nuk.uni-lj.si/cosec/, with a membership of 155 libraries).The total makes up to 373 libraries in the region. Besides supporting the creation of local networks of libraries in almost every Balkan member country, eIFL.net has also attempted and encouraged to foster a greater regional cooperation based on the exchange of knowledge and experiences and showing success stories at national level as an inspiration for others.

In order to facilitate the setting up of the consortia and the kick-off of activities, eIFL.net has awarded several consortium building grants. Once a consortium is formed, the local community of librarians designates a main contact person, the so-called country coordinator, whose tasks include keeping eIFL.net abreast of local progress and needs and making sure that eIFL.net news and updates on its services are widely and efficiently distributed at the country level. eIFL.net and every Western Balkan country has signed a Memorandum of Understanding and a yearly membership fee applies, based on a wide set of socioeconomic criteria and human development indexes, in the attempt to make it as fair and realistic as possible.

Some examples of achievements

The above mentioned library consortia have all achieved remarkable progress: the main service that all provide to their member institutions is licensing access to electronic resources; they also give training on electronic resources management marketing and advocacy for libraries, local systems and union catalogs services and raise awareness about the latest trends in the profession like open access, intellectual property rights and open source software for libraries as they get sustainable, in organizational and financial terms.

eIFL.net has kept on supporting consortia in Western Balkan countries through a number of actions, including paying *ad hoc* country visits whenever there have been signals of temporary bottlenecks, organising national workshops on issues of relevance to the local communities, such as electronic licensing, consortium development and management and evaluation techniques, distributing learning resources, conducting online surveys to follow up on their progress and providing advice and consultancy on negotiations with publishers. eIFL.net also holds and sponsors awareness raising and capacity building events on more recent eIFL.net programs, like Open Access scholarship (for instance, eIFL OA workshop in Serbia in 2005 and eIFL.net sponsorship to local events on Open Access in Slovenia in 2005 and Croatia in 2006) and Intellectual Property (like the regional eIFL IP workshop on copyright issues and libraries for eIFL.net European countries, with the participation of the Western Balkan member countries, in December 2005). The recently launched eIFL FOSS program intends to address a top issue in the agenda of libraries, that of the internal management and functioning of libraries through the installation of integrated library

systems, by raising awareness of the possibilities and flexibility offered by free and open source software. The program has started to build up a virtual community of local open source software experts in libraries and has participated in the Open Translation Tools Conference organised by the Aspiration and Multimedia Institute in Zagreb at the very end of November.

Last but not least, eIFL.net Western Balkan countries are actively engaged in the ongoing eIFL Institutional Repositories Initiative which, as part of its Open Access program, intends to increase the global visibility and seamless access to research output produced locally. Within this framework, eIFL.net has established a partnership with Netherlands-based SURF Foundation and with EU-funded DRIVER (Digital Repository Infrastructure Vision for European Research, http://www.driver-repository.eu/) project with the intention to facilitate a common infrastructure for the exposure of repositories created within the eIFL.net network. In fact, according to the Institutional Repository online survey conducted by eIFL.net in 2006, Western Balkan countries have already gained some experience or intend to create local repositories soon and therefore the eIFL Initiative fits nicely with their needs in terms of consultancy, wider coordination and promotion[2]. To name but a success story, within the context of promotion of research electronic material without barriers, the national consortium in Serbia KOBSON is playing a nationwide leading role in raising visibility of local content through open access and institutional repositories (read KOBSON success story at http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/news/spotlight/2007_09_10_libraries-supporting).

Recently eIFL.net held its 7th General Assembly (GA) in Belgrade – this is the most important and intensive annual eIFL.net knowledge and information sharing event. Hosted by an eIFL member country every year, such a conference gathers a community of around 100 people including eIFL.net staff, country representatives of the local consortia, invited speakers and publishers and aggregators who present their products. It is a truly intensive 3 day conference whose preparation requires a dedicated work that starts one year before the event. KOBSON, under the lead of the National Library of Serbia, felt ready to accept the challenge for 2007, resulting in a very successful international conference with attendees from nearly 50 different countries from all continents- the first at this level to take place in Serbia (you can get a sense of geographical distribution of eIFL GA participants this year at http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/services/knowledge/ga_all/ga2007/group-foto).

However, in spite of the many achievements in a relatively short period of time, important obstacles remain on the way towards the full consolidation of knowledge societies through stronger and modern libraries in the Western Balkans. Funding constraints for the acquisition of new technical

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[2] In Serbia, the Scientific Institute for Veterinary Research (http://niv.ns.ac.yu/en/index.php), the National Library of Serbia (http://nainfo.nbs.bg.ac.yu/KoBSON/service/MiUWOS.aspx), University of Nish (http://oramiror.junis.ni.ac.yu/docenti/disertacije.htm), the Center for Evaluation in Education and Science (http://www.scindeks.nbs.bg.ac.yu), University of Novi Sad (http://diglib.ns.ac.yu/frontOffice/index.jsp?newLang=en), and the National Library of Serbia Digital Object Identifier (DOI) Repository (http://www.doiserbia.nbs.bg.ac.yu/) are some examples of institutions which are already building institutional repositories with local scientific content. Slovenian consortium COSEC is also undertaking own institutional repositories projects, as exemplified by the one by the Faculty of Computer and Information Science (FRI, http://eprints.fri.uni-lj.si/).

Likewise, a growing interest in open access shows in Croatia, where some ongoing initiatives on institutional repositories include those by the University of Zagreb Medical School Repository (http://medlib.mef.hr/) and the Famena PHD Collection at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture (http://www.fsb.hr/). For its part, the Academy of Sciences in FYROM outstands in the provision of access to scholarly electronic resources across the country and a growing interest in open access and IRs has been evidenced in the eIFL.net online survey conducted last year.

infrastructure, shrinking budgets for the purchase of scientific e-resources as a result of government priorities in other fields and/or lack of full support and awareness of the challenges that libraries face nowadays, a strong reliance on public funding, persistent mind sets that look into this sector in an old-fashioned way, under-trained staff, and, still, some Internet connectivity issues may summarize the general context where libraries strive to advance in the region.

By having a closer look into national conditions, libraries in Albania still face important challenges as regards access and dissemination of scientific information which is derived from funding deficiencies and obsolete technologies. Updating of resources and collections in many libraries and upgrading professional staff are important needs and improving Internet connectivity in many universities in the country also rank high in the local agenda.

As far as Bosnia and Herzegovina is concerned, research infrastructure was severely damaged and scientific activities were reduced greatly during the war. In addition, unstable financial aid, which reverts in small operational budgets and very limited capacity for work planning, together with lengthy and complicated administrative and legal procedures keep to slowdown the full development of projects in the field. The library consortium in UNMIK/Kosova is making headways lately however the overall scenario is mired with a number of challenges, including severe financial constraints to continue to purchase electronic resources and expand consortium activities, legal organizational obstacles, and persistent weaknesses in infrastructure and professional training.

At the other end of the scale, libraries in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia enjoy good Internet connectivity and an increasing public budget for the purchase of international journals and databases. Besides, the fact that a few local initiatives to make their research collections accessible over the Internet are underway or already up and running highlights the quality jump they are making. However, whereas their agendas are expanding, any success hinges heavily on acquiring the appropriate experience and skills in fundraising and marketing and still many libraries lack modern communications equipment.

Libraries in the Republic of Macedonia are placed on a medium stage, whereby Internet access and connectivity are not outstanding issues any more, yet the national library consortium encounters problems to mobilize the funds needed and the commitment for access and dissemination purposes. As a result, libraries still have rather small operational budgets but are developing fundraising and promotional activities in order to diversify their financial sources.

eIFL.net in its own capacity is working with them all to help address these needs and priorities in the best way possible by providing support and professional expertise and offering services on latest trends in library and information fields. Equally, eIFL.net serves as a shortcut for the local library communities to engage at the international level. But there are still many opportunities to continue fruitful cooperation and establish new partnerships with like minded initiatives, in order to contribute to the advancement of access to knowledge and information in the Western Balkan region.