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# Beyond Access Myanmar – Connecting Communities

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*Final Evaluation Report*

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Beyond Access is an initiative implemented by International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (hereinafter, the Gates Foundation). IREX is a nonprofit organization that aims to build a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world by empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information.

In recognition of Beyond Access' importance within the Global Libraries portfolio, the Gates Foundation decided to invest in evaluations of key Beyond Access initiatives for the purpose of informing the capturing of successes and learning. The selection of Myanmar as one of the key Beyond Access programs to be evaluated was based in part on the model of the program (i.e., the Development Lab approach<sup>1</sup>), the alignment of the Myanmar project's desired outcomes with the Global Libraries program's goals (improved digital literacy), and the fact that the work in Myanmar was just getting started and that data collection could be conducted early enough in the project lifecycle to support learning by identifying program needs and offering a baseline for the evaluation itself.

IREX's Beyond Access project in Myanmar has set out to create safe spaces in libraries where users could access technology and training for free. This was done in the hopes that Myanmar citizens would improve digital literacy skills and that the libraries would provide access to marginalized groups that would otherwise not benefit from access to the new technology and information. The evaluation has sought to explore the extent to which the project has been able to achieve these desired outcomes.

## Design and Methodology

The Beyond Access Myanmar evaluation was a 2-year evaluation effort with primary data collection conducted in two phases: the first early in the lifecycle of the project before libraries were provided with the full extent of Beyond Access Myanmar support (Phase 1), and the second approximately 1 year later to assess changes that had taken place with the support of the intervention (Phase 2).

Both phases of the evaluation employed monitoring data review, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, individual questionnaires, library observations, and document reviews. In both

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<sup>1</sup> "Development Lab" is the way that IREX originally defined their approach which relied on close partnership with local partners and used funding from the Gates Foundation to leverage at least one-to-one co-funding from a local coalition of partners.

cases, following the field visit, a learning session was held to capture perceptions of IREX staff, which further generated findings for the report.

Evaluation data for both phases of site visits were collected via a library-based sample. Libraries were sampled purposively based on categories determined prior to Phase 1 in conjunction with IREX and the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF) to reflect the diverse spectrum of library types. This strategy enabled the capture of a range of perspectives with the potential to affect and explain project results and, also, understand how different groups may be experiencing the project differently.

## Findings

Table 1 below shows the findings that emerged through this evaluation related to:

- The positioning of libraries within the development landscape
- The state of technology in libraries
- The demand for technology evidenced by the community.

**Table 1: Beyond Access Myanmar Evaluation Findings**

<p><b>Positioning Libraries and Librarians Within the Development Landscape</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having a strong implementing partner capable of advocating for modern libraries and working toward sustainability through diverse partnerships is an essential component of transforming libraries in Myanmar.</li> <li>• Training and the establishment of communities of practice through Beyond Access have empowered libraries/librarians in Myanmar to embrace their new role working to support community development by connecting people to information.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The State of Technology and Resources in Libraries</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a result of Beyond Access and other subsequent initiatives taking place in libraries, community members are now able to meet their demands for access to technology.</li> <li>• Without free Internet access in the libraries, community members are less likely to use the technology that is available or to benefit from the potential for digital literacy skill development.</li> <li>• Beyond Access Myanmar libraries are increasingly offering training opportunities that respond to community needs and build digital literacy skills. Tech Age Girls (TAG) is a particularly successful example of community-driven programming.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Community Members Using Technology and Becoming More “Digitally Literate”</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While libraries could do more to promote the availability of tablets and technology, Beyond Access libraries are the preferred place to access the Internet.</li> <li>• Library users continue to be largely the young, educated, and middle class with an increasing number of women due to Beyond Access’ efforts.</li> </ul>
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## Conclusions

As a relatively nascent program (started in late 2014), Beyond Access Myanmar has already begun to show signs of impact at the national, library, and community levels.

**Conclusion 1. At the National level** – Even in the face of challenges in implementation, the Beyond Access Myanmar consortium’s efforts have resulted in increased visibility and promise for the inclusion of libraries on the national stage. MBAPF’s partnerships with other organizations and the work that is currently being conducted with the Ministry of Information to develop a national plan are clear results of IREX support. After receiving start-up and ongoing technical support from IREX, MBAPF is seen as the go-to resource and leader in library modernization in the country. For grantors, these national-level results affirm that a country-led, Development Lab approach, with the right support, can effectively boost project sustainability.

**Conclusion 2. At the Library level** – The Beyond Access project has shown that libraries can be relevant and useful partners in development, serving as hubs where users can convene to access information and build digital literacy skills. Very early on, Beyond Access Myanmar achieved a great deal in terms of its mission to provide access to technology and the Internet through libraries. In addition to providing the technology and connectivity, Beyond Access also provided librarian training and developed programs, such as TAG, to help make libraries more responsive to community needs. Through Beyond Access efforts to date, libraries and librarians are coming to embrace the vision of Modern Libraries.

**Conclusion 3. At the Community level** – The Beyond Access project has shown that community members have a demonstrated demand for technology and information, and a willingness to use libraries as their point of access. It is important to remember that the community-run libraries in Myanmar are the de facto choice as centers of intellect and new information. As such, Beyond Access Myanmar’s choice of providing access and training and infomediary services in libraries to increase digital literacy is a logical one. Given the high cost of mobile data and the fact that communities greatly trust libraries in Myanmar, communities will likely continue to use the libraries for these resources so long as they are available. As a result of Beyond Access, library users began accessing technology and support in the Beyond Access libraries, evolving from users conducting basic tasks, like web surfing and playing games, to doing more complex tasks, like conducting searches and using productivity applications. Community-driven programs like TAG have shown demonstrated results in driving new users (young women) to the library to access technology.