

Engaging Remote Mountain Communities with Knowledge, Information and Technology in Kyrgyzstan by Aline Rosset and Jangyl Ismailova

In Kyrgyzstan, socio-economic disparities between urban and rural areas are considerable. These differences are particularly apparent with regard to access to knowledge and information and communication technology (ICT). Access to ICT is especially problematic for remote mountain areas. The pilot project eBilim is a mobile digital library housed in a minivan that visits ten villages each month and provides information resources for mountain communities.



The mobile digital library eBilim on a jailoo

credit eBilim/UCA

In December 2013, the mobile digital library eBilim was inaugurated at the University of Central Asia (UCA) in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan. The initiative is a one-year pilot project, designed and implemented through a partnership between UCA's Mountain Societies Research Institute (MSRI) and the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme (MSDSP KG), with financial support from the German development organisation *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ).

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eBilim is designed to bring information resources to ten remote villages in Naryn and Ak-Talaa districts of Naryn province in Kyrgyzstan. ‘Bilim’ means knowledge in the Kyrgyz language and ‘e’ indicates electronic media. eBilim brings together locally accessible knowledge and current technology. The library is housed in a refurbished minibus equipped with books, laptops and a digital database of over 3,000 text, audio and video resources. This information is available for printing and downloading to USBs, DVDs, cell phones and MP3 players. The database contains information on a broad range of subjects, including agriculture, education, local governance, law, health, human rights and literature as well as interactive learning resources for teachers and children. In its first six months, eBilim reached

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more than 2,200 school children and over 1,000 adult users, most of whom were teachers or village and sub-district administrators. The pilot project is proving to be a highly valuable tool for connecting remote villages to relevant and up-to-date information. In turn, it provides UCA and its partners with a powerful outreach tool with which it can involve communities, gather feedback and learn about the everyday realities in remote mountain villages.

Background: Disparities in access to education and information in Kyrgyzstan

Disparities between urban and rural areas are particularly high in the Kyrgyz Republic. This can partly be explained by its rough topography, rendering access to infrastructure, markets as well as health and education services difficult. Additionally, the Kyrgyz herders spend four to five months per year on the summer pastures, which exacerbates the gradient in remoteness and inaccessibility.

Despite the fact that literacy rates rank high at 99% in Kyrgyzstan, the accessibility and quality of education is very low compared to regional indicators. Enrolment figures in the Kyrgyz republic have consistently decreased during the past five years, which could be due to rising formal and informal costs of schooling, poor educational quality and reduced private returns of school completion.

Teachers earn less than 40% of the average national earnings, making them underpaid, under-trained and overburdened. In addition, schools and teachers are vastly under-resourced in terms of materials and working conditions.

Regarding disparities in access to education, the gender gap is not a significant issue in Kyrgyzstan. The rural-urban divide is of much greater concern, though. Although access to primary school is comparable in rural and urban areas, in secondary school the number of rural children attending is six percentage points fewer than in urban areas. In pre-primary school, this gap is intensified, showing three times lower attendance rates in rural areas.

For more information, see:

Merthaugh, M. (2004): Education in Central Asia with particular reference to the Kyrgyz Republic. In: The Challenge of Education in Central Asia, edited by Stephen P. Heyneman and Alan J. DeYoung. Information Age Publishing, Greenwich Connecticut.

UNESCO (2011): World Data on Education. The Kyrgyz Republic. 7th edition, 2010/2011.

UNICEF (2008): Education in Kyrgyzstan. Country profile:
<http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/Kyrgyzstan.pdf>

During the summer, village life in Naryn's rural communities is much less animated than in spring and winter. Schools close at the end of May and many families move to the *jailoos* or summer pastures in Ak-Talaa and Naryn districts. In response, eBilim adapted to Kyrgyz nomadic traditions and relocated its activities to the jailoo as well. In July, eBilim conducted



three extended tours to distant *jailoos* in Naryn, offering herders and their families access to information, entertainment and learning opportunities.

“During the summer, eBilim provides unique opportunities for villagers to learn and grow when they move to the summer pastures. All infrastructure and connections to the world are left behind. During our trip with the eBilim team to Karga jailoo, herders and their families were very interested in the information and services provided by eBilim,” said Altynbek Apsaliev, Head of the Pasture Committee of Jan-Bulak village.



In the evening, as the sun disappeared behind the mountains, the *jailoo* was transformed into an open-air movie theatre. The film screening, organised by eBilim, drew children and adults from surrounding yurts to enjoy a Kyrgyz movie. *“Although it was really cold, it was a great experience to watch a movie under the stars,”* said Nazima, a young girl whose family is herding sheep, cows and horses in the pastures near Song Kul Lake.



Snapshots from the eBilim project

credit eBilim/UCA

Aigul, whose family is also herding livestock near Song Kul, added, *“During the day, we were able to quickly learn how to use the educational tools offered on the computers. I feel that getting time to practice the use of Information Technology prepares me for the future and links me to the modern world”.*

“getting time to practice the use of IT prepares me for the future”

Aibek Toktogaziev, a veterinarian from Dobolu village, agreed, *“eBilim’s visit to the jaiolos allowed me to discover new dimensions of knowledge in the field of veterinary medicine. Being on a jaiolo, far from the usual infrastructure, I was able to spend my free time reading and find information. I gained new insights into livestock and pasture management, as well as agriculture.”*

“by visiting the jaiolos, eBilim extended its access, gaining a new audience, with different information needs”

While some of the library users in the *jaiolos* were familiar with eBilim from its visits to the villages, many had not yet accessed the library’s services. Some herders live on the outskirts of the village, too far to use eBilim during its regular stops. By visiting the *jaiolos*, eBilim extended its access, gaining a new audience, with different information needs.

To evaluate information and resource needs and its utility, eBilim has gathered feedback from its users in villages and in the *jaiolos*. This feedback will be used to improve the database and ensure its relevance to its users in remote mountain communities. The project will also extend



Reading at dawn on a jaiolo

credit eBilim/UCA

“eBilim is making its electronic database accessible to a broader audience in mountain communities by cooperating with a network of libraries across Kyrgyzstan”

its reach to other communities across Kyrgyzstan. eBilim is making its electronic database accessible to a broader audience in mountain communities by cooperating with a network of libraries across Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, UCA will utilise eBilim as a coordinating platform for organisations focused on agriculture, education, local governance and health to share information and engage in hands-on activities to increase access to practical knowledge and information in remote mountain communities. UCA and its partners will also use eBilim as an outreach tool to enhance linkages and cooperation between researchers and local communities.

The University of Central Asia (UCA) was founded in 2000, by the Presidents of Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan and His Highness the Aga Khan, to offer an internationally recognised standard of higher education in Central Asia and prepare graduates to contribute leadership, ideas and innovation to the economies and communities of the region. For more information on UCA, please visit: www.ucentralasia.org.

UCA's Mountain Societies Research Institute (MSRI) is an interdisciplinary research institute dedicated to addressing the challenges and opportunities within Central Asian mountain communities and environments. MSRI's goal is to support and enhance the resilience and quality of life of mountain societies through the generation and application of sound research. www.msri.ucentralasia.org.

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